

BETRAYAL

Book 2 of the Non-Vampire Series



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This is again dedicated to

Maggie, my reason for living.

Thank you for inspiring and

encouraging me every day

in everything you do and are.

I love you, my Maggie!

Saturday, May 17

"Can you believe our girls are high school graduates?" Peggy asked Ted.

"Don't get too excited," I told her. "I've graduated several times."

"Well, Brynne, that may be, but this is Jessica's first time, so I'm still excited."

"We're proud of you two." Ted told me and Jess.

We just got home from our graduation ceremony, where we had walked across the stage wearing hideous green robes and gotten our diplomas. It was weird to hear cheers when they announced my name. That never happened any of the other times I graduated. But the Sloans were cheering as loudly for me as they did Jess, I think.

Since moving in with them a year ago, I really think I've become closer to them than I ever was my own family when they were still alive. The Sloans *are* my family now, really.

"Where is Barney?" Jess asked. "He was supposed to have my car back by now."

"He's off with Shelly." Peggy told her, smiling.

"She seems like a nice girl." Ted added, with a smile to match.

"So I finally get my license and he has my car all the time." Jess complained. "Why can't he get his own car? Or does his crap job not pay enough to make payments?"

He loads trucks for a shipping company here in Hanton. His first real job. It's just part time, but at least it is real work. He runs a forklift part of the time, but a lot of the time he has to manually pack the

boxes into the trailers. None of them would ever have to work again if they would just let me pay for things, but Ted shot that down. He believes in hard work and pride in a job well done. I kind of respect that, really.

“Can we borrow your car, Dad?” Jess asked Ted. “There’s a party we’re suppose to be at, and who knows when Barney will get back.”

“No drinking.” he said, holding the keys out to her.

“Yeah, yeah.” she said, laughing. “Does alcohol affect vampires, Brynne?”

“I’m not a vampire!” I told her. “How many times do I have to tell you this? We’re *not* vampires.”

“Whatever we are, does alcohol affect us?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Peggy said. “You’re too young to drink.”

“I didn’t say we would,” Jess told her. “I was just curious if we would even react to it at all.”

“Well stay away from that stuff tonight.”

“And stay away from the boys.” Ted told her. “And girls.” he added for me.

“Right, so we go to a party and stay away from all the boys and girls.” Jess said. “So as long as there is someone there who isn’t either a boy or a girl we can talk to them, right?”

“Jessica,”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’re just going to hang out for a little while. We’ll be back early.”

“Speak for yourself.” Jess whined.

“I don’t want to stay late anyway, Jess.” I don’t even like most of the people we go to school with, honestly.

“I know, honey.” she said, ruffling my hair. “We’ll leave early.”

Jessica is supposed to be listening to me, doing as I say. She agreed to

that last June, when I changed her. Life is different when you're like us, and she doesn't know enough about it yet to stay out of trouble. But I find it very difficult to get her to pay attention to me. She just ruffles my hair and smiles, then does what she wants anyway. I love her dearly, but it upsets me when she does that.

We hurried out to Ted & Peggy's car. Jess stuck the key in the ignition and was turning it when my cell phone rang. I answered it, though I didn't recognize the number.

"Hello," I said, curious who may be calling.

"Good evening, Miss Brynne." he said in a heavy Italian accent.

"Oh." I said, recognizing the voice. "Hi."

"Who is it?" Jess asked.

"I am in Kansas City, visiting a colleague." he said. "We would like to visit with you at your earliest convenience. What time tomorrow should we expect you?"

"Um," I looked over at Jess, at how curious she was about my caller. "I don't know if we can make it tomorrow, we..."

"Miss Brynne, must I remind you of our agreement?"

Our agreement. The Venator Inmortuorum, a secret group ran by the Vatican, whose mission it is to hunt down and kill vampires. The agreement is to let me and Jess live, and even provide us a monthly supply of blood, as long as we stay out of trouble and agree to assist them when they ask for our help. But it has been almost a year, and this is the first time they've contacted us.

"We'll be there." I said, sighing.

"Before noon." he told me. "I will text to you the location."

"Alright."

“It is my understanding that congratulations are in order for Miss Jessica and yourself?”

“Um,”

“Please give her my regards.”

“She heard, I think.” I said.

“We will see you tomorrow, Miss Brynne. Ciao.”

Jess looked more upset than I even was. I was not awake when this agreement was made, it was all her doing. Not that they left her any choice, really. We either agreed to play nice and help them or they would execute us on the spot. Not much of a choice.

“Paolo sends his regards.” I mumbled.

“I don't feel like partying anymore.” she told me. She pulled the keys from the ignition.

“This sucks.”

We went back inside and told Peggy and Ted about the call. After that, we went up to our room and I climbed into the top bunk while Jess sat at the desk and googled directions to the address Paolo gave us.

“The last time we went up there was with Tony and Teresa.” I said.

“Yeah.” she replied. “I talked to Tony a few days ago. He said to say hi.”

“I thought you two were still broken up.”

“I ran into him at the store.”

“Oh.”

Those two have been on again, off again for years now. The thing is, he's a very nice guy, and she has fun with him, but they don't ever seem to get past the movie buddy phase. She's always the one breaking up with him, too. The poor guy must feel like a yoyo, the way she yanks him around. I don't know what the hangup is, either. She just doesn't seem to be all that into him.

"I asked about her," she said. She was still staring at the computer screen.

"And?" I miss her. There's this ache down inside that hasn't gone away in all the months since Teresa broke up with me because of what I am.

"She's doing good."

"I'm glad," I said, wiping the tears away. "Really glad."

"Tony said she is with some other girl now."

"Oh." Great Jess, ruin my evening even more. "Good for her."

"Honey, you two just weren't meant to be, that's all."

"I know."

"Some day you will find someone new, and when you do you're going to forget all about Teresa and how much she hurt you."

"Maybe." Not a chance.

"See, we should have gone to that party." She stood and stepped over beside the bed. "There were at least two other gay girls I know of who were going to be there. Maybe if you spent time with them,"

"Lisa and Candace?" I asked.

"Brynne, if you just gave them a chance..."

"The last time you tried to set me up with one of them..."

"Well you walked out in the middle of dinner!" she snapped. "Lisa was really upset, too."

"Jess,"

“I'm just trying to...”

“Don't help, okay? Please stop trying to set me up on dates.”

“Honey,”

“Please.”

She didn't agree, but she did stop talking about it. Instead, she returned to her computer and watched some of her favorite music videos. I managed to block them out well enough to get to sleep.

Sunday, May 18

"I don't like this idea *at all*." Barney told me. He hefted my bag into the trunk. He's trying to be nice, but I can probably carry five times as much as he can. "Brynne, this stinks of being a trap."

"Why would they need a trap? They know where we live." I said. "We'll be careful." I assured him.

"You better be. Are you sure I can't come along?"

"We'll be fine, Barney. Thank you."

He stomped inside, muttering to himself about how we were just setting ourselves up, and he hoped we wouldn't be killed. The guy is still a little on the creepy side at times, but he doesn't leer at me anymore. He has kind of moved on, I think. Finally. But he seems to have this weird big brother attitude toward me now, and it's annoying. I mean I'm over a hundred years older than him!

Jess came out, and she got behind the wheel of her little red car. We headed out of town, toward KC and our meeting with the Venator Inmortuorum. Barney is right, it felt like a trap. I can't think of any way it would be, it wouldn't make sense, but it felt like it.

"I can't believe we're done with high school." Jess said.

"Ya know, I've probably spent eighty years in school." I told her.

"Such a waste." she laughed.

"I have always enjoyed it. And anyway, if you hate learning so much then why are we moving to Illinois next month? I thought that was all for your college?"

"It is. But it's different when you don't have to go, when you choose to."

"I choose to go to high school."

"Yeah but... not the same thing, honey."

Not the same. Right. So it's okay for her to go to school because she wants to learn and improve herself, and more likely party with other kids around her age, but it's not okay for me to want to go to school to learn and to meet and hang out with kids who are my apparent age? That's fair.

"I had a dream last night about her." I said.

"What happened?" she asked, not needing to ask who *her* was.

"I dreamed that she was angry at me, that she came looking for me and pretended to want to get back with me."

"Brynne,"

"And then when we were alone in her house she brings in this other girl and introduces me to her. The other girl and her are dating, and they laugh when I get upset. And then they kill me."

"Honey, you've got to stop obsessing over her."

"Yeah, I know."

"It's not healthy."

"I love her."

"You barely knew her."

"But Jess,"

"You've got to put that behind you and get back on the horse. Even if you just go on dates with girls you know you'll never stay with, it's good to get out and see that life goes on."

"Easy for you to say." I said, poking her in the side with my finger.

"What about you and Tony? You drop him every time he even seems to want to be more than just casual."

"I'm not going back with him."

“You've said that before.” I pointed out.

“I mean it this time. There's just... I mean there's nothing there.”

There's never anything there at all. But she tried dating a couple of other guys in the past year, and there was nothing there at all with them either. I think she just doesn't know what she wants yet. Tony would do anything for her, and he's a really nice guy, but if she isn't feeling any connection then I guess she can't force herself.

When we arrived at the location where we were supposed to meet Paolo it was a huge building. There were at least 20 floors, but the office we were going to was on the second. I couldn't help feel a little like I was walking to my death, and leading Jess to hers, as we headed toward the outer door.

I paused before entering. If this was a trap, as Barney suspected, Jess could die. That wasn't a risk I was willing to take. But I know if they wanted us dead we would be before now. I struggled, but I managed to force myself to open the door and enter. Everything was nondescript inside, sort of like a low budget doctor's office.

“Good morning.” a skinny blonde woman said from behind her desk. “You ladies are expected.”

“Hi.” I said. I noticed Jess staring at a man to our left. He was dressed in fatigues and had an automatic rifle in his hands, but he wasn't pointing it at us. “Um... who are... these?” I asked, pointing at the man Jess was watching and another similarly outfitted on our right.

“Security.” the woman answered. She stood. “If you would come this way.”

She guided us through a set of doors on the right, and our little security detail fell in line behind us as we went down a drably colored, unlit hallway to another set of doors. She swung them open and went inside.

It was a huge room, warm colors and soft lighting, with a huge curved conference table in the middle. Along the walls of the room stood another six armed men, all carefully watching us. On the opposite side of the table sat Paolo. To Paolo's right sat a hulk of a man with thinning gray hair and mean eyes the color of boiled peas. To that man's right sat a young woman, probably in her twenties, with jet black hair that hung straight and long, and cute little pink glasses that did nothing to block the view of her big brown eyes. She wore a blazer over a white button down shirt, none of which did anything to hide her slender, muscular frame.

"Thank you Grace." Paolo said in his heavy Italian accent. "Please excuse us now."

"Yes sir." she said, retreating from the room quickly.

"Miss Brynne, Miss Jessica, it is so nice to see you again." he said sincerely.

"How have you been?" Jess asked him, giving a smile.

"Well. Please," he indicated the seats before us. "Make yourselves comfortable."

"Pfft." the man next to Paolo snorted out.

"Yes, well," Paolo said, shooting him a glare. "This is my colleague, Field Agent Sandford Marcus, and then we have Special Agent Celeste Marcus."

The man grunted again, clearly not in a good mood today for some reason. His... wife, or daughter?, smiled brightly and nodded toward us. She can't be his wife, can she? She's very young, and it would just be gross.

"Pleased to meet you." Jess said to them, as we sat.

"What's with all the guns?" I asked Paolo.

“Ah, yes,” he looked at the elder Marcus. “Agent Marcus, perhaps we could...”

“I don't trust them.” he mumbled.

“What was that, Agent...”

“I don't trust them!” he shouted, slamming his fist on the table. “Especially this one.” he said, pointing a meaty finger my way.

“Dad,” the woman said. “Agent Marcus,” she corrected. “They have a proven track record of...”

“I don't care!” He pounded the table again. “I don't like this. This, my friend,” he told Paolo, pointing a meaty finger his way. “Is not going to work.”

“Have faith, my friend. We will make it work.” Paolo assured him.

“What is this about?” Jess asked.

“We have...”

“Before we discuss anything,” I interrupted him. “I would really rather you send the militia men out.”

“Absolutely not!” Agent Marcus said, once again taking his anger out on the furniture.

“Sandy,” Paolo said calmly. He placed his hand on the other man's arm. “I trust these two. If you trust me, then you must trust them also.”

“I...” he looked around, apparently as confused by Paolo's logic as I was. “Very well.” he huffed. “But one wrong move...”

“Thank you.” I said.

We waited as the men with guns slowly made their way from the room. It felt like each one was making a point of making eye contact with me, like they were warning me. I guess, given the situation, I can understand that, but it still was... um, well, intimidating.

"We have a request for you two." Paolo said. "A mission."

"Oh cool!" Jess said. "Does it involve sneaking into a secret foreign base and finding the plans for their new doomsday weapon that will turn everyone into zombies?"

"Seriously, Jess?" I asked her.

"Hey," she shrugged. "Just asking."

"We have a lot of shaky reports of... activity in this area. We will need you to help us locate the perpetrators of this activity, if they are still around."

"So you want us to track someone?" I asked. I can do tracking, I guess.

"Not precisely, but we do want you to find them."

"And if we don't?" I asked.

"We invite the guards back in here to finish this conversation once and for all." Agent Marcus spat out.

"Sandy," Paolo said, again grabbing onto the other man's arm. "It would be quite unfortunate, Miss Brynne. For all of us. I find that I am quite fond of you, and I do not wish you any harm, but our agreement stipulates that we leave you be and provide you the blood you need in exchange for your help."

"Bunch of leeches." Agent Marcus said.

"Dad, stop it." the woman said. "You've seen the same records on these two as I have. They aren't like the other vampires."

"I'm not a..." I began.

"We're not vampires!" Jess insisted.

"My apologies." Special Agent Marcus said. "How would you like us to refer to the two of you?"

"We're, um," Jess said. She looked at me and shrugged. "Brynne?"

"How about just Jessica and Brynne." I suggested.

"Very well." the woman said. "Please call me Celeste."

“Unacceptable.” the elder Marcus said. “If this has any chance at all, and I don't believe it does, then I insist we keep this completely professional. No getting cozy with each other.”

“Dad, this is neither the time nor the place...”

“You shouldn't even be a part of this operation.” he told her.

I have no idea what this guy has against us, but clearly there is something more than the fact that we aren't exactly normal teenage girls. He doesn't seem to like what we are, but his attitude and the way he keeps looking at me just... there has to be something else.

“Tell us about the ones you want us to find.” I said.

“Miss Brynne, you and Jessica are somewhat different than most other vampires.” Paolo said.

“Please stop calling us that.” I told him.

“Yes, well,” Celeste said, giving Paolo a bit of a glare. “You two aren't murderers, like the others. And we think we can trust you to...”

“We can't trust any of them!” Agent Marcus insisted.

“We can trust you,” Celeste said, speaking over her father. “to help us find these awful creatures and put an end to what they are doing.”

“What are they doing?” Jess asked.

“We are not sure, Miss Jessica.” Paolo said. “Many young people have been found dead recently, but they have no apparent injuries. Something...”

“A leach.” Agent Marcus said.

“Dad!” Celeste snapped at him. “If you can't keep your opinion to yourself then just leave!”

“You should not be involved in this.” he told her. He stood, pushing his chair back quickly until it toppled. I tensed, but remained seated. “And I refuse to be.”

He stomped out of the room. Celeste looked angry enough to scream, but she managed to maintain her professionalism. She removed her glasses, wiped at her eyes, shook her head, then looked to Paolo and asked him to continue.

“Special Agent Marcus, we cannot continue without your father. He was the agent in charge, without him there is no-one to oversee this operation.”

“I’ll do it.” she told him.

“You are not authorized, Special Agent.”

“Paolo, children are dying. My father is being a pigheaded ass, but we can’t let that prevent us from trying to stop whoever is responsible.”

Paolo’s face flattened into an unreadable mask as he considered what she had said. I don’t yet know what it is they are wanting from us, but whatever it is must be important, because he is giving this a lot of thought.

“If you die, your father will never forgive me.” he said to her. “You will stay out of the action and let these two take care of things. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” she replied.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Take care of what?”

Paolo had that stony poker face return as he turned to me. Why is it he can’t just tell us what is going on and get it over with? They need our help, right? So why be so secretive? This is stupid. I never agreed to this, and I don’t need them. If I didn’t think it would put Jess in danger I’d just take off. If she weren’t in the picture I’d just run far away and they’d never find me. But I can’t do that to her. And I don’t think I can bear to be without her anymore, anyway.

"I will let Special Agent Marcus explain upon your return. For now I want you to go pack your things. You will be moving into an apartment here for the time being."

"Wait, what?" Jess asked. "For how long?"

"We cannot predict, Miss Jessica, but we are making plans for at least a year."

"What about her college?" I asked. "She isn't missing out on college for this."

"I'm afraid..."

"She can go to college." Celeste cut him off. "But it will have to be here."

"That's not fair!" I said, rising to my feet. "If you aren't giving us details and you are forcing us to move here then... then I'm afraid we'll have to say no."

"Miss Brynne," Paolo said. "I believe we have made ourselves clear on the result if that were to be your decision. That would be unfortunate, no?"

Part of their agreement was to let us live and give us blood, and that is all well and good. We could probably just run off and get away, though, and they know it. That's why there was also a threat to Jess's family if we ever were to do that. And they talk about innocent people getting hurt and how we have to stop it, while they themselves make that kind of threat.

"But..."

"It's okay, honey." Jess said. She grabbed my arm and pulled me back down to the chair. "I can go here." She looked up at Celeste. "As long as I can get in to some place I like here."

"I may be able to pull some strings." Celeste told her. "I will do my best to help. I am sympathetic, I know this is inconvenient for the both of you, but we really do need your help. There's something

killing teenagers out there, and we need to stop it.”

“How?” I asked. “What good will we be?”

“You're a teenager. You can fit in and try to find out what is going on. I will brief you upon your return, ladies. I promise I will let you know everything I know, I just would prefer we do that once we're a little more settled.”

“This isn't fair.” I mumbled again.

“I know, but you will be saving lives, and I know that means a lot to you.” she said, sympathy filling her beautiful eyes.

“I... I... alright. But... if there's anything dangerous then Jess stays out of it.”

“What? Brynne,” Jess protested.

“Hey, you're supposed to be listening to me, remember?” I pointed out.

“Yeah, well that isn't going to go on forever, ya know.”

“Here is the address you will be staying.” Celeste said, sliding the paper across to me. When I reached for it, our hands touched. She was so warm. “I'll expect you there tomorrow morning.”

There really wasn't a lot to say at that point, apparently, because they shooed us from the room and sent us home. The armed guards were all waiting in the outer office, and they had guns at the ready when we came out, but there were no incidents, if you don't count all the glares.

The sad thing is, even though we had plenty of time to check out malls and stores that I don't get to see very often, I just wasn't in the mood to shop. That does not happen very often. But my mind was stuck in a loop, thinking of how unfair it is that I have to once again disrupt my life to take care of some evil thing I have no link to. I just want to be a normal teenage girl, but I never get that chance.

Peggy and Ted were very upset when we told them what we had to do, and Barney was trying to convince us to let him come with us. I could see how worried they were, Peggy especially, about Jess.

"I'll take care of her." I told Peggy. This was just as Jess and I were headed up to bed.

"Who's going to take care of you?" she asked. She smiled a sad smile. "Try to be safe, okay? Both of you."

"We will."

I brushed my teeth, showered, put on my Pjs, and went into our room to pack my stuff. Jess was finished packing by then, so she took her shower.

I climbed into the top bunk and pulled my doll tightly against me. I wonder what the Venator Inmortuorum would think of their favorite lap-dog vampire-ish creature if they knew she still played with dolls.

"Why does this have to be me, Jenna?" I asked my doll. She has been there for me when nobody else was for the past several decades.

"They should at least let me leave Jess here so she doesn't get hurt. I don't know, I guess I should be grateful that they don't kill us. They even give us a supply of blood. So what if we have to spend a little time working for them? We have centuries to live, if everything goes well, so what is a year?" I pulled the blanket up over me and rolled to my back. "I just don't like having to answer to them, I guess."

When Jess came in she put her clothes in the hamper, put some moisturizer on her face, then climbed into the bottom bunk. I tried to go to sleep, but she was tossing and turning, and it was keeping me up.

"I'm sorry you're being sucked into this." I whispered.

"It'll be interesting, I think. Plus, we get to help people, and that's a good thing."

"I guess so."

"Plus, hey, *Special Agent Marcus* is cute, right?" she asked. I could hear the smile in her voice.

"For a straight girl, you talk about other girls an awful lot, ya know?"

"I can see that other girls are pretty and not want to date them, Brynne." she said, kind of defensively. "Besides, honey, I was talking for you. You thought she was really cute, didn't you?"

"What? No, I... I don't know."

"Oh come on, you thought she was hot. Admit it."

"I... why would I think that? She's forcing us to do things against our will, and that is never *hot*."

"Honey, you have a look when you're interested in someone. It took me a while to figure it out because I've only seen you look at two people that way before Celeste."

"I do not."

"You do! You were making all sorts of googly eyes at Teresa once you two got together."

"No I wasn't!" I miss her so much, though.

"Yes, honey, you were."

"I... whatever." This is silly. "Okay, okay, so even if I admit that, and I'm not, then... I mean you said two people?"

"Oh. Um," she said. She gave a little giggle. "Yeah. Well, anyway, goodnight."

"Who..."

"Night, honey. Sleep well." she said, cutting me off. "Goodnight Jenna."

Oh crap. Is she... she's talking about... Well, I mean of course I think she's pretty, and amazing, and a wonderful person, but... well I mean I know *she's* off limits, she's my best friend. She's very straight. I

wouldn't dream of... but... Oh crap, have I been 'making googly eyes' at her?

“I'm so embarrassed.” I mumbled. I felt tears filling my eyes.

“Don't be.” she whispered. “Goodnight Brynne.”

Monday, May 19

“Make sure you don't forget Jenna.” Peggy said to me as Jess and I were heading out to the car, boxes in hand.

“I got her.” I said. It's embarrassing that they all even know her name.

Ted and Barney left for work earlier in the morning. It still blows me away that Barney finally got a job. Anyway, Peggy is the only one here to see us off, she didn't work today. I wish she did, though. She's going to sit here all alone and worry about Jessica. I don't like that she has to worry so much. She is a nice lady, and she doesn't deserve to have to go through all of this with us. Neither does Jess, though.

“I'm going to do my best to keep her out of trouble, Peggy. “ I promised again. She nodded, but didn't speak. “We'll come back to visit in a few days. I'm going to try to talk them into letting me do this alone so she...”

“Not a chance, honey.” Jess said, fluffing my hair from behind. “I have to take care of my bestest friend of ever.”

“Jess,”

“No arguing.” Peggy said. “You both be careful. I trust that you'll be okay, as long as you have each other's back.”

“Always.” Jess said.

You know those days when you just have that nagging feeling that something isn't right, and you know you should just go back to bed and hope whatever it is will work itself out before you wake up again? I'm having one of those days, except ten times worse. I know I already was feeling like we shouldn't be going up there for this, but there's like this other huge, ominous feeling, and I can't put my finger on it.

“Look on the bright side of this, honey.” Jess said. “Kansas City is full of little gay girls who would love to have an opportunity to go out

with you.”

“Are you back to this again?”

“Yeah, and I'm going to be back on this over and over again until you at least go on a date with someone else and try to get over Teresa.”

“You've never really been in love with anyone, have you?” I asked. I knew she hadn't. “I'm not going to just get over her. Not ever. And I don't even want to.”

“Then what do you want, Brynne?” she asked. Kind of snippy. “You can't spend the next ten thousand years pining for her and not moving on, okay? So if you can't have her, what is the plan? Be alone?”

“Maybe.” I mumbled.

She's right, I'm never going to see Teresa again. Never talk to her, never hold her hand, and never kiss her. Never hear her say she loves me. And that sucks. And if I can't have that, what do I really want? Do I want to be alone, really?

“It's just too soon.” I told Jess.

“I know.” She reached over and rubbed my shoulder with her right hand, her left hand still firmly planted on the steering wheel. “I know, honey. Some day it won't be, though. I just want you to be open.”

“I... Maybe. Some day.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “I hope she is happy. That's what I really want.”

It is what I want. And I also want her to hurt because of what she did to me. Quite conflicting emotions, really. But it's hard to blame her for leaving me when my life is as messed up as it is. And she's going to keep getting older, while I stay basically stuck at fifteen for the next hundred years.

Teresa is probably out shopping with the new girlfriend right now. Laughing, trying on silly jewelry and hats and making fun of each

other in that playful way she has. I wish that could be me. Instead I'm stuck in a life I didn't ask for, don't want, and would gladly give up just to get a few years of normalcy.

After stopping to eat lunch at a Wendy's, we made it to the apartment around 1:00 PM. We found a parking spot a couple of hundred feet from our apartment, then carried a couple of boxes each as we headed to see our new home. Yay.

"You're here!" Celeste said. She stepped out of the apartment and met us on the sidewalk. "When your mother said you were coming I just couldn't believe I'd get to see you so soon." She grabbed one of the boxes from me. "You look so much like her." she said to Jessica. "I remember when I met her my first day at college." she said, laughing. "She was visiting her younger sister, your aunt June, in the dorm. She was going in as I was going out and we literally ran into each other in the hallway." She laughed again and gave a tiny nod to an older couple sitting on their patio. So this is a cover story, I guess? She's not even that old. Closer to our age than Peggy's. "She felt so bad about it that she took me out for coffee. We were friends from then on."

"Mom said you asked her to coffee, not the other way around." Jess said, playing along.

"Well however it was, I wouldn't have made it through chemistry without that woman's help, so I'm glad I can do her a favor now by putting you two up for a while."

"She says hi." I muttered, not quite sure if I liked this.

"You better call her and let her know you got here safely." Celeste told Jessica. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to meet your mother, Brynne. But any friend of Jessica is welcome here."

"Um, uh, thanks." I said, feeling a weird little butterfly feeling in my stomach.

Jess went though the doorway, into the apartment, and Celeste followed her, with me coming in behind them both. The place was white, and very neutral. The carpet was kind of a drab khaki color.

The living area and kitchen shared one big room, and there were doorways to the bedrooms off the back side.

"This one is mine," Celeste informed us, pointing to the nearest bedroom. "and you two will be sharing the other one."

"What's with the whole act out front?" I asked.

"As far as the neighbors here are concerned, Jessica is the daughter of an old friend," she told us. "You're staying with them after your parents passed." Sympathy showed on her face. "Sorry if that's too close to reality. Anyway, you came to stay with me for a while so Jessica's parents could go off to Europe for a few months."

"Would have been nice to know that when we got here."

"I didn't expect to have nosy neighbors who sit out there all day," she said, her brown eyes bright and wide and full of gorgeous life today. "Sorry."

"Uh, um, yeah, it's alright," I said, feeling my face heating up. "I better go get the rest of our stuff."

I brought our boxes in and Jessica and I unpacked things in our room. I was feeling kind of down, and very nervous, and I guess Jess noticed, because she stuffed my doll into my arms, then pulled me in for a hug. I guess I was just overwhelmed by everything, because I was crying.

Celeste called us into the kitchen for dinner. She had been cooking while we unpacked, and the homemade pizza she made smelled wonderful. But as we sat to eat, I noticed Celeste's eyes on me, and she had a bit of a smile on her face. I felt butterflies again, but then I noticed I was still holding on to Jenna. As embarrassed as I felt, I still tugged her up against me and ignored Celeste's look. So what if she thought I was a baby?

"Mmm." Jess moaned, chewing on the cheesy masterpiece.

"Tell me what we're doing here." I said.

“Don't you want to enjoy your pizza first?” Celeste asked me, smiling toward my plate.

“Not really.”

She huffed out a breath and wiped her pouty lips with her napkin. Ugh, Jess was right, I do think she's hot. Why did we have to have a hot agent in charge of this? When she was done wiping her mouth, she took a sip of water and gave Jess and I each a little look.

“There have been teenagers showing up dead around here off and on for a while now.” she said. “Usually girls.” she said, giving us pointed stares.

“So we're bait?” I asked.

“Yes and no. We need to catch whatever is doing this. If it were to come after one of you two we think you would be very capable of taking care of it. Probably.”

“*Probably* doesn't sound very reassuring.” Jess told her.

“I'd prefer it not attack either of you. I just want you two to find it so we can send in someone else to take care of it.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“We're not sure.” she admitted. “We think it's a striga.”

“A what?”

“A striga. Uh,” she looked away from us, up at the ceiling in the corner, as if the answer were somewhere up there. She has a really pretty chin. “They sort of suck the life force from you. Not you, necessarily,” she said, her eyes landing on me. “Anyone. They usually prefer children.”

“Why children?” Jess asked. “They don't do anything else to them, do they? Because that's just beyond disgusting, and I don't want to even get near the things if that's what is going on.”

“But killing the kids is okay?” I asked her.

“Well no, but... I mean if they're going to die anyway...” She shrugged.

I get what she's saying, I guess. If you're going to kill the kid, just do it. Don't take away their dignity and humanity in the process. Killing is awful, but at least they can go in peace.

“So what do these str... stree... whatever... what do they look like?” Jess asked Celeste.

“Like you or me, maybe. A normal looking human.”

“They could at least have the decency to look like a monster.”

“Like a vampire?” Celeste asked, a slight smile.

“We are not vampires!” I said, probably too loudly. “I'm sick of being called that. We're not monsters.”

“Okay, okay, so you're a...” Celeste said, making a face as she was thinking of what to call us. “Non-vampire?”

“Right.” Jess agreed.

“Whatever.” I said shaking my head. “Sorry, I just get touchy sometimes.”

“Noted.” Celeste said with a slight chuckle. “So anyway, we just want you to find this thing-- or things-- and then we'll take care of them. The last few victims have been teen girls working in the area shopping centers.”

“Yay, we get to hang out at the mall!” Jess said, nudging me. “You love to shop, Brynne.”

“Yeah, well, you don't.” I replied.

“Jessica, you will be working at a store in the mall.” Celeste told her. “That makes it easier for you to see if anyone suspicious is around.”

“Wait, we have to work?” Jess asked. “That's not right.”

“You do. Brynne is too young, most of the stores wouldn't hire her.”

“What! But Brynne is... I mean she can pretend to be... She just needs...”

“We have other plans for her.” Celeste said. “She’s going to be working with me at a local homeless shelter. Some of the victims have been homeless, too. The shelter serves lunch and dinner every day, and they can always use volunteers.”

“Um... what if I’m not a very good cook?” I asked.

“You’ll be serving and cleaning up, so don’t worry.”

Well, I mean their plan puts us in the parts of the population that are being targeted, but it separates us. I promised Peggy I’d take care of Jess. How can I do that if we’re apart?

“I’m afraid I have some bad news for you, Brynne.” Celeste said. She looked... scared? To tell me.

“Go on.” I told her.

“The VI council has determined that they cannot support someone’s, uh, ill-gotten gains.” she said. “I tried to argue in your favor, Brynne!” she added quickly. “Lord knows your life has been a living hell, and you deserve everything you’ve got in the bank. But the council doesn’t see it that way, so...”

“You’re taking my money?” I asked.

“It’s already done. As of this morning, all your bank accounts that we know of have been seized.”

“You can’t do that!” Jess said. “That’s her money, she...”

“That’s not fair.” I said. I even managed to do it calmly.

“I know, Brynne.” Celeste told me. “They let you keep one checking account you had with about twenty thousand in it, I think, but the other accounts were confiscated.”

“Are you taking the stuff she bought already?” Jess asked.

“No, they’re not...”

“Because you can’t take away her stuff!”

“Jess,” I said, trying to calm her.

"It's not right that they would take your stuff, Brynne!"

"No, it's... I mean I... kinda get it." I said. "I stole that stuff, at least at the start, so..."

"But they can't take..."

"They're not taking the car!" I snapped.

"Jenna." Jess said. "I don't care about the car, we can get another car, but they can't take Jenna."

Seriously? She is worried they will take my doll away. Wow. Um... I guess I really drove home the point that this doll has been a friend to me for a very long time. I feel sort of bad that she got so worked up about it, but... I mean it's really sweet that she's that concerned about it.

"They're not." Celeste finally said. "They aren't taking any of the items you currently have. They at least agreed to that much."

"You okay?" Jess asked.

"I'm fine."

"You, um..." she pointed to my cheek.

"Oh," I wiped the tears from my face. "Sorry."

I'm broke. Almost literally broke. I just went from having millions to having only a few thousand. That sucks, big time. I get it, it was wrong to take the money from people, but I repaid it many times over after I started making more from my investments. I mean... isn't that compensation enough?

"I'm sorry, Brynne." Celeste told me. "I think you've done pretty good with what you've had to deal with, and I think that money is rightfully yours now."

"It's okay." I said, trying not to sound too upset.

"Why don't you go lay down for a while? You don't look so good. We can talk more later."

"I really... you guys said you knew stuff about Alejandro. Paolo seemed to know a lot about him when we talked before. I need to know that." I told her. "Right now, if you could."

"Do you know anything about him?" she asked. "Where he came from, how he got to be a vam... I mean a..."

"No, you can call him a vampire, that's okay." I said. "And no, I don't know anything about him, really."

"Thought so." she said. "Let me take care of this first."

She was up and gathering plates before I could put up much of a protest. She rinsed them, put them in the dishwasher, then started in on some glasses. I was going nuts by the time she got back to her seat.

"He was a VI agent." she began.

"What? No, that can't..."

"It's true. He was one of the first, in fact. They had entered a town in Northern Spain, tracking three vampires, and were attacked. He fought them off the best he could while his partner and most of their assistants escaped. But he was turned."

"That's horrible!" Jess said.

"He became the VI's worst nightmare. He knew all their secrets, all their plans. Something went wrong when he was turned, and he was very violent for the first few centuries. We think he killed at least ten thousand people before his death."

"Ten... ten?" I asked. "Thousand?"

"Yes. Mostly before the year twelve hundred. After that he mellowed quite a bit."

He was a mass murderer. How could I believe anything he said at all, ever? He said I was the last, and he had to have known there were a lot more. He said he tried to change my family and failed. He said he was lonely and needed a companion, someone to talk to and spend time with. Was I just... I mean why would he pick *me*? Unless it's because I am a girl, and he thought he could control me and make me

into his... whatever it was he wanted. He was a true monster.

“And now I have his blood in me.” I said. “I’m like him,”

“No,” Celeste said.

“What?” Jess said at the same time. “No, honey, you’re not like that at all.”

“Jessica is right, you aren’t like him.”

“I am.” I said. “He made me what I am, and I’m... whatever was in him is now in me, and that means I’m just as evil and awful and soulless as he was.”

“Brynne, honey, you’re sweet and...”

“You’re the most gentle and kind vampire I’ve ever seen or heard of, Brynne.” Celeste told me. “*Non-vampire.*” she corrected.

“Anyway, um... I think I will go lay down for a while.” I said.

I laid in the bed and thought about our situation. Okay, we can handle this. Right? As long as I keep Jess away from these things, these striga. Whatever they are.

This room is different than back home. We don’t have bunk beds, for one thing. Instead we have two twin beds, along opposite walls, and a big walk in closet that we have to share. And one dresser. It just doesn’t feel quite right. I hope I can sleep. Plus, I can hear the couple upstairs arguing over who got the last pickle, so... it’s noisy here.

A homeless shelter. She wants me to work at a homeless shelter. I guess at least I’ll be helping people. Jess is going to be stuck at the mall. The thing is, I’d totally rather be at the mall, but not working there. No, working there would ruin the fun. Watching everyone buy all the things I want. And now suddenly can’t really afford. I wonder what I’ll do for money.

Jess and Celeste were watching a scary movie when I came out after my nap. They were on the sofa, sharing a bowl of popcorn, while the vampires on the screen chased the screaming girls through the dilapidated house. That's just so realistic. Honestly Jess, don't you know better?

"Oh, here, sit." Jess said, scooting over and making just enough room for me to sit in the middle.

"Um, I don't... I can't really..." This is embarrassing. Why is she doing this to me? "Those movies scare me." I said. I'm sure I'm all red now.

"Oh, we can turn it to something else." Celeste offered.

"No, I..."

"It'll be okay, Brynne." Jess said. "Come on."

She pulled me over and down onto the sofa. She shoved me over against Celeste. I tried to protest, but Jess smiled and her eyes went from me to Celeste, and then she winked.

"Seriously?" I mumbled.

"Have some popcorn." Jess said, plopping the bowl in my lap.

The thing is, this is really uncomfortable. I wish Jess would stop trying to set me up with people. I had my shot at love, and it didn't go too well. I'm okay being alone now. Forever. This sucks. But I mean... come on, Jess, Celeste works for the people that just took millions of dollars from me. Yeah, sure, I'm going to be all over her now. Right.

Why must Celeste be so dang hot, though? Isn't life hard enough without having to see yet another girl I can't have? Ugh.

Tuesday, May 20

“Hey, wake up honey.” I heard Jess saying. She shook me again.

“Time to get up, sleepy head.” she said in baby talk.

“Leave me alone.”

“Come on, I have to head out and I need your help.”

“What?” I sat up. “Head out where?”

“Work.” she said, curling her nose up. “Can you believe I have to start already?”

“That was quick.”

“Yeah. Anyway, you're better at this stuff than me, so do you think the blue shirt and brown boots, or maybe the white shirt and the black flats?”

“You're wearing those pants?” I asked, looking at the black jeans she had on. She nodded. “Wear the blue shirt, but the flats.”

“Uh, okay.” She slid her t-shirt off and pulled the blue button down on. “And maybe tonight or tomorrow I can get you to take me shopping so I'll have work clothes. I really kinda should have decent clothes if I'm working at a clothing store, I guess.”

Okay, I admit it, I laughed at the thought of Jessica working at a clothing store. It was rude, and I apologized to her, but I laughed. She's not exactly... um... she's not really interested in fashion, let's say.

Harsh reality hit when I went in for breakfast. This is really happening. I'm really being forced by these people to search for whatever these striga are. They really did take away all my money. Suddenly my granola bar didn't look so tasty.

Celeste didn't really talk to me much at first, just went about setting

things up and unpacking her things. She did offer to make some coffee, but I don't drink it. That's about all she said until 10:00.

"You need to get dressed, we have to leave in ten minutes." Celeste told me. I had been sitting on the sofa, watching cartoons.

"To go where?"

"To work at the shelter." she told me, giving me one of those looks that said I was irritating her. The feeling is mutual, lady.

"Can't we wait until tomorrow?"

"No."

"Celeste, I just... I don't feel like it today."

"Brynne, we have to go."

"I just..."

"Look, you're going!"

I don't know, something about the way she said it made me think she meant business, so I went in and got dressed. And then I dragged myself to the parking lot, to her car. I was expecting a blue or black sedan, but she led me to a tiny yellow two seater, which was maybe slightly bigger than a go-kart and had a sticker on it claiming it was a hybrid.

The car was actually quite roomy inside, but I still couldn't get comfortable. I was thinking of how much I miss Teresa. How much it sucks that I lost the only person I ever cared that way about because of what I am. What Alejandro made me.

"I know it was a lot of money, Brynne." Celeste said. We were at a stop light and she was turned toward me. "I tried to tell them it was yours now, that most of it was legit, that you paid back people and put money into charities. They didn't care about that, and I'm sorry I

couldn't convince them.”

“Whatever.”

“If it helps, you two are getting paid pretty good for this.”

“It doesn't.” I said. “How good?”

“Same as a field agent.” she told me. The light turned green and she pulled away. “The same as I am making for this operation.”

“Which is what?”

“It works out to about a hundred thousand a year, in the end.”

Well that's not too bad. It doesn't make up for the millions they took from me, but it does give me something to reinvest.

“So, uh, how do you know so much about me?” I asked. “You know how I got the money, what I did with it, pretty much everything else about me.”

“I spent a lot of time studying you.” she said. “Everything anyone with the VI has learned in the past year, since we've known of your existence.”

“But most of that you wouldn't...”

“You'd be surprised what we can find out once we have a description, a name, a few details here and there.”

“I never told you guys enough to...”

“But you were out of it for a while, healing.”

“I... you... talked to Jess?”

“Not me personally, but the VI, yes.”

“That was just...”

“You shouldn't be angry with her, she probably saved your life. If the agents didn't think you were worth keeping around they would have taken care of you right then.”

"I'm not angry at Jess." I told her. "What else did you learn? What did I do that made your father so angry with me? I mean I've done things, but..."

"That's probably my fault." she admitted. "He is worried I won't be able to maintain a professional relationship with you."

"What does that mean?" I asked, shaking my head and taking in the buildings we were passing. "That makes no sense."

"He recently discovered I'm gay."

"Oh."

So? So she tells her dad she's gay and suddenly I can't be trusted? Well that makes perfect sense, in a sort of *not* kind of way. Parents are sometimes weird. Maybe she said something about me. Like maybe she said I was pretty or something, and he got concerned because of that. Is she as attracted to me as I am her?

"We're here." she said, nodding toward a very nondescript building.

She got out of the car and locked her door. She waited there for me to do the same before we headed up the sidewalk. I think I was still tingling at the possibility of her being interested in me when she introduced me to the lady who runs the place.

"Ingrid." the woman said. Or more like grunted, really.

She's an older lady, quite possibly born before I was. Probably not, but she looks like she could be eighty, for sure. She has gray shoes, gray pants, gray shirt, gray glasses, and gray hair. All of which fit really well with her wrinkly, gray colored skin. I'd shake her hand, but I'm afraid I'd break her.

“Aprons are in the back. Get busy.” she ordered.

“Yes, ma'am.” Celeste replied.

“And keep an eye on her.” she said, a crooked finger pointed in my general direction.

“I will, ma'am.”

I followed Celeste into the back and we put on aprons-- gray, naturally-- before heading out front to clean tables and get things ready for lunch. There were already people coming in, wanting their food.

“So how did you end up with the VI?” I asked Celeste as we cleaned a table together. “Your dad?”

“Not here, Brynne.” she said, scowling.

“For that matter, how did the VI even start? How old is it? Why did the church call it that? Who is actually in charge, anyway? The Pope?”

“Not here!” she said, clearly angry. She took a deep breath and blew it out. “I will happily answer your questions, but not when others are around. Wait until we're home.”

“Oh... um... sorry.” I said.

I don't deal well with people being mad at me. It really kind of hurts my feelings, honestly. Especially if they are people I like at all. So it kind of upset me that she was so harsh in how she said that. I understand that we can't talk in public, and I shouldn't have asked, but that was kind of mean how she said that.

“What's wrong?” she snapped.

“Nothing.” I whined. I felt my eyes watering.

“Sorry I got grouchy. But we need to have that discussion at home, okay?”

“Okay.” I said, sniffing.

“Brynne, I'm sorry.”

This is stupid. I have to get control of myself and stop being a baby. I just want to go home and forget all about this. They can keep the stupid money, just let me go back. I want to relax, knowing that I'll be having dinner tonight with Peggy, Ted and Barney. Instead I'll be having it with Celeste in a place I don't feel comfortable in. I doubt that apartment will ever feel like home.

I put my anger aside and was able to concentrate enough to work. Well, okay, so all I did was clean tables and help with trash, and cleaned up a few spills, but when we were done with lunch I actually felt pretty good about it. There were so many people coming in who looked as if they hadn't had a decent meal in a long time, and I know I played a part in providing that for them. Even if all I did was clean.

“You'll be back tomorrow.” Ingrid told us. It wasn't a question.

“Yes, ma'am.” I responded. Celeste wandered off.

“You cook?”

“Not very well.” This is exactly what I was afraid of. “I can cook some simpler things.”

“Tomorrow you will help in the kitchen. Clara is gone for the next two weeks.”

“Um, yes ma'am.”

“You will help Willa.” she informed me. “Willa,” she shouted.

“Hang on.” a voice from the kitchen shouted back. “Be there in a second, Ingrid.”

Ingrid was stone faced as she waited. It's almost like the woman is conserving energy by showing absolutely no feeling in her face. No

smile, no frown, nothing. I wonder how she does that. Of course she is older than the state of Kansas, so maybe she just doesn't have the energy to express herself.

"What'd you want, Ingrid?" a girl not much older than I am asked, as she stepped into the room.

"Tomorrow this girl," she said, looking toward me and waiting.

"Oh, uh, Brynne." I said.

"Will be assisting you in the kitchen." she told the girl. "Make sure she does her share."

"Sure thing." the girl said.

Ingrid disappeared into the kitchen. She moves quickly, surprisingly. I turned toward the girl. Maybe seventeen, tall and thin, long blonde hair streaked with pink, and six piercings on each ear.

"I'm Willa." she said, giving a big smile and extending her hand.

"Brynne." I replied. We shook.

"I'll probably have you handling the rolls, maybe stirring some soup, nothing too difficult." she said.

"I can do that."

"Good." she said, smiling again. "So this the first time you've volunteered?"

"Um,"

"Brynne," Celeste shouted. She was over by the door, and she waved me over.

"Um, I gotta go." I told Willa. "It was nice to meet you."

"Later." she said, smiling and giving a half a wave.

The ride back to the apartment was more of the silence. I wasn't sure how to take it, honestly. I just learned this morning that she may possibly be interested in me, but then since then she has been grouchy with me. I don't get her at all.

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked. It was my subtle way of asking her age. Or not so subtle, maybe.

"Driving?" she asked.

"No, the VI thing."

"I've been with the VI for a while now."

"How long?"

"Oh gosh," she said. "Since I was a teenager, at least informally, and officially since I turned twenty."

That didn't work so well. I mean at least I know she's over twenty, but I have no idea how much over. I kinda knew she was older than twenty before, though. Or suspected.

Jess's car was there when we got to the apartment. It wasn't supposed to be. She was supposed to work until four, and it was only a little after two. Celeste seemed as concerned about that as I was. She hurried from the car as soon as she had it parked. I beat her to the apartment door, but I was quite impressed by her speed.

"Jess!" I shouted, upon entering the apartment. "Jessica!"

"Over here." she said. I spun toward her. She was sitting on a seat by the front window. "I'm okay." she told me.

"What happened?" Celeste asked her. "Why are you home?"

"They closed the store for the investigation." she explained. "There

was a body found in the back store room.”

“I knew it!” Celeste said. “We have to call Paolo, we need to get people rolling to see if we can catch the striga before they...”

“I don't think it was a striga.” Jess told her. “There were bite marks, and I think the blood was drained.”

“A vampire?” Celeste asked. “Not you?”

“Well duh.”

“Jess wouldn't do that.” I said in her defense. “I can't believe you'd think she would.”

“I'll still need to call Paolo.” Celeste told us. “This is good, you're helping already.”

“No, this is bad.” I said.

“How could you ever think it was good that someone was dead?” Jess asked her.

“Well no, not that she is dead.”

“He.” Jess corrected.

“Not that *he* is dead. Just that you helped find another vampire. One more we can eliminate, who won't have a chance to do it again.”

“I don't want Jess involved in that.” I told Celeste.

“Neither do I. As far as anyone is concerned, she is just one of the employees who were sent home today.” she headed toward her bedroom. “If you'll excuse me, I have calls to make. You'll have to fend for yourselves for dinner, I'll probably be busy all night.”

There goes our plans of her telling me how the Venator Inmortuorum began. I'll just have to remember to ask her again tomorrow. And the next day, if I have to.

“How did your day go?” I asked Jess. I sat on the floor at her feet. “I mean other than the dead body.”

“Not too good, actually. I'm not sure what I'm doing, for one thing. And all the girls I work with are like super smart, for some reason. It's kind of intimidating. Makes me feel like a moron.”

“You're not.”

“Feels like it. So how was your day?”

“It was kinda okay.” I said, thinking about Celeste's admission that she is a lesbian, and her hint that she is interested. Of course then she was grouchy with me all day, so who knows. “The lady that runs the place might be a mummy.” I told her.

I spent the next five minutes explaining that Ingrid really is not a mummy, because Jess thought I was being serious. And then I described the rest of the day to her. She kept asking me if Willa was cute. I swear she just thinks I'm going to fall for someone else and completely forget Teresa. That can never happen.

Friday May, 23

"I might get a tattoo." Jess said. We were all at the table eating our cereal.

"What would you get?" Celeste asked her.

"A zebra."

"Why a zebra?" I asked.

"I don't know. Zebra's are interesting, don't you think?"

"Interesting enough to have for the next ten thousand years?" I asked.

"Yeah, not really." she said. "I always liked the sound of a xylophone." Jess said, her randomness coming out again.

"You want a tattoo of a xylophone?" Celeste asked.

"What?" Jess said. "No. That's just weird."

"You said..."

"I like the sound of a xylophone. I didn't say anything about a tattoo."

"Oh." Celeste said. She looked down at her cereal and scrunched up her nose.

The past few days have been very interesting. Jessica has continued to work at the store in the mall, and she has seen a couple of suspicious people lurking around, but none appear to be the vampire who attacked the dead guy. At least one of them appears to be your typical stalker, and he seems to have eyes on the store manager. Then there is another guy we think is a druggie, looking for a guy who comes in once a week to help unload the truck when they get a new shipment in. It is apparently well known by the other store employees that the guy who works once a week is a drug dealer.

My work at the shelter has actually ended up being somewhat

enjoyable. I get along great with Willa in the kitchen, so that's good. And Ingrid hasn't said a single word to me since Tuesday, so I'm fine there as well.

But at the apartment we have been inundated with visitors from the VI, and every time they come we have to answer a million questions and they make us go through stacks of pictures to see if we recognize anyone. They are very hush hush about what all they are doing, but they clearly are conducting an investigation apart from just me and Jess trying to find the striga. I don't know why they aren't sharing any information with us.

And then Celeste. Well, she seems to avoid me now, for some reason. I haven't been able to pin her down long enough to get answers out of her. About anything, really. I still have no idea what is really expected of us here. Are we supposed to just wait to stumble upon the striga?

"Tell me about how the VI began." I said.

"Well," she looked at the clock. "We don't..."

"We have time." I told her. "You've been avoiding talking to me all week."

"Jessica, don't you have to be at work soon?" she asked.

"I don't go in 'til ten." Jess said. It's only eight now.

"Oh." She looked around, then pulled her phone from her purse. "I need..."

"Stop it!" I said, yanking the phone from her. "What is the big deal? Just talk to us."

"Brynne," she sighed and closed her eyes. "I've already divulged more than I am supposed to."

"You've divulged nothing!"

"Why so secretive?" Jess asked plainly. "We're working for them now too."

"No, you aren't." Celeste told her. "You're just... outside contractors, at best."

"Tell us." I said.

"Well," she sighed again. "It's nothing too exciting, we're just not supposed to talk about it. I promise you it's nothing that matters, but we take a vow when we sign up, and... well, honestly I wasn't even supposed to tell you that much."

"When did the church start the VI?"

She sat very still for a minute, eyeing her phone. She darted her hand out and snatched it from me, taking me by surprise. She put her finger to her lips in a shh sign, then carried the phone over, and buried it under the cushions of the sofa. She then waved us back into our bedroom.

"They listen." she told us. "To everything. To everything we say and do, and everything you've said and done in the past year."

"They've been spying on us?" Jess asked.

"Wouldn't you?" was Celeste's response. "They needed to know they could trust you."

"So all this time when we thought we had privacy," I began.

"They didn't hear everything, obviously." she said. "Just whatever you talked about when the cooler with the blood was around."

"Isn't that some kind of violation of our rights?" Jess asked.

"Jessica, you're a mythical creature who doesn't exist, as far as everyone else is concerned, so what makes you think you have rights?" Celeste asked her. "And we do what we have to in order to protect the world. Individual rights are secondary to that."

"Okay, okay," I said. "So why so secretive about things? It's not like we're going to tell anyone."

"Because..." she said. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. "Because the only reason you exist is because of the VI."

"I don't understand." Jess said.

“Me either.” I added.

“Just... you should know this, I guess.” Celeste said. She pointed to my bed. “Sit down.”

She took a seat on Jess's bed and waited until we were sitting on my bed before she began. And even then, she was shaky and jittery, playing with the zipper on her sweater and not looking at us.

“Around the second century BC several groups of druids came together to form what we now know as the Venator Inmortuorum.”

“Wow, that long ago?” Jess asked.

“Yes. And the reason it formed is because there were a lot of attacks of demons all through Europe. At least that's what they were convinced of, anyway. So they formed the VI to hunt down and destroy the evil creatures.”

“How does that make the VI responsible for our existence?” I asked.

“Around the year 170 AD the group realized they were losing ground, that they would send people out to fight these demons and they would be slaughtered. Many were infected by the demons and would become one themselves. That's how it works, they infect you and you become whatever it is.”

“So Alejandro infected me?” I asked.

“Well yes, but it's different.”

“And I infected Jess?” I asked. She nodded.

“So anyway, around 170 they decided they were losing ground, and one of the... I guess you could call him a scientist now, maybe. Anyway, he decided to find a cure. A vaccine to prevent the infection from these creatures they viewed as demons.”

“Sounds reasonable.” I said.

“His first few test subjects all failed. Miserably.”

“They died?”

“The lucky ones.” she said. “Some went mad, some became very ill, but didn't die for decades.”

“And some became vampires?” Jess asked. “Is that how we came to be?”

“We're not...” I started to say.

“No.” Celeste answered. “At least not directly. They had two subjects who took the vaccine and seemed okay. But they were attacked by a vicious creature, one whose bite would cause its victim to slowly wilt away, rotting from the inside over a period of weeks. Except these two didn't react that way. Something different happened to them. Instead of rotting away they grew stronger, gained some of the creature's extra senses, and they almost stopped aging.”

“Vampires.” Jess said.

“And *non*-vampires.” Celeste added for my benefit, giving a little smile. “If the VI hadn't been playing around with the human immune system then the vampires would never have existed.”

They created us. Wow. So... so we're an early failure of genetic manipulation, or something like that. All this time they have been trying to make up for their own mistake. I wonder how many have died because a group of druids twenty centuries ago decided to create a super-human. How much evil have they unleashed on the world?

“How did you end up under the control of the church?” I asked.

“Well we're not, not really.” she said. “We cooperate with and stay in contact with the church, since our mission is to eliminate the same vile monsters they want eliminated from the earth. But we don't answer to them. Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“Well... let's just say since 252 AD, I think, we've almost always had a Pope, or more often a Cardinal, on our committee of directors. That first one was Pope Lucius, and he was big on fighting demons. They were kind of scared of him, according to the stories.”

“Why was this being kept from us?” Jess asked her.

“It's a very secretive organization.” she answered.

So secretive that they wouldn't share our origin with us? I wonder who the oldest living vampire is now. Are either of the two originals still out there?

“Any other mythical creatures who owe their beginnings to the VI?” I asked.

“Not that I'm aware of.” she said. “Brynne, I'm so sorry. If it weren't for the VI your family wouldn't have been killed like they were.”

So it's all their fault? This whole thing, this... my family dying, me being this way, it's all them!

Okay, okay, that's not true. Not directly. Alejandro still is the one who did it, he is the one who made the decision to attack us. They may have created vampires, but he still had free will. To a certain degree, anyway. Besides, it's not like I can do anything about it now anyway, so it doesn't help to be angry.

When Jess headed off to work, Celeste and I headed out to the shelter. Willa was waiting for me when we got there. She immediately stuck me on chopping onions. Apparently she can't do it, her eyes are too sensitive. I barely tear up from the onions. Not really because I'm a... Celeste calls us *non*-vampires, which I kinda like. Not because I'm like this, I never had a problem chopping onions before I was changed. Some people apparently just aren't as sensitive.

“A bunch of us are going to World's of Fun tomorrow.” Willa said to me. She sat a bunch of potatoes in front of me, I'm assuming for me to peel. “You should come if you're not busy.”

“Um, I don't know if that's a good idea.”

“Hey, if you can't handle the big rides it's okay, one of us will wait with you, or go ride another ride with you.” she said. “There are ten of us going, other than you, so there'll probably be at least one other person needing a break, or who doesn't feel like riding The Mamba or Boomerang.”

“I'm guessing those are big?” I said. “Uh... I just...”

“Come on,” she whined. “It'll be fun.”

“Um,”

Okay, so... I mean I get that she's trying to be nice and all, and I appreciate it, but we barely know each other, and I don't know if we classify as friends. I mean I guess we do. Still, I don't know any of her other friends. I mean... I don't know if I really want to be around that many strangers.

“See, uh, I have a skin condition, and...”

“What kind of skin condition?” she asked, looking down at the food I was holding.

“Oh, no, it's just... I sunburn, like *really* easily. I can't be in the sun, so...”

“It's supposed to be cloudy. Plus, you can usually find some shade. Come on.”

“I just... I...” I sighed. Great. “I have to, um, ask Celeste.”

“Oh. Well let me know, okay?”

“Um... and... I mean... can I bring someone else, too?”

“Yeah, sure, no problem.” She smiled. “It's a public place anyway, so it's not like I could stop you. So... who are you bringing?”

“Um, if I can go I'll probably see if Jess can go.”

“Ooh, is he your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Uh, no. I... I don't... I'm gay.”

“Oh. Well that sucks.” she said. “I thought you and my little brother might...”

“Why are people always trying to set me up!?”

“Sorry, I just...”

“Jess does the same thing. All the time!”

“Who is this Jess guy? Is he cute? How old...”

“Jess is short for Jessica.”

“Oh. She your girlfriend?”

“No, just my best friend, that's all.” That's not all. I mean I live with her, I turned her into a monster, we're connected on a whole different level than just friends.

“I see. Well, bring her along. We'll all have fun, I'm sure.”

“If Celeste lets us come.”

“Right.” She held her hand out. “Give me your phone. I'll put my number in there so you can call me and let me know if you're coming.”

The thing is, I don't like being around people a lot of times. I do, but then I'm just reminded of what I can't be and can't have. I can't be carefree and laugh and play in the sun like they do. I have to be on guard all the time, I have to avoid the sun, I have to be careful not to do anything stupid that would expose me or Jess. I can't have the normal friendships they all have, either. I tried that with Jessica, and as much as I love the girl, I see now how big a mistake that was. I doomed her. I ruined her normal, happy life. She doesn't even realize it yet, it hasn't been long enough, but she will one day.

“But I deserve to have fun, too.” I mumbled.

“What?” Celeste asked. We were in the car, heading home.

"I... nothing."

"I talked to Jessica a little bit ago," she said. "She won't be home until late tonight. She has a date."

"She's allowed to have a date?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure she is." She elbowed me. "You are too, ya know."

"Um,"

Is this a hint? Is she telling me she'd like to go on a date with me? That's really sudden. I mean she kinda said before that she was interested, or hinted at it, or something, but this is unexpected. Am I ready for that? I mean she's very pretty, gorgeous even, but I don't know her very well. I don't think we've talked enough to really click like that yet. Not like I did with Teresa, and that was right off the bat. But I may never have that with anyone again. Does that mean I should never date?

"Willa is cute. You should ask her out."

"Wh-what?"

Oh. So... so she wasn't saying... Oh. I am so *glad* I didn't say anything and make a fool of myself. I wonder how red my face is right now, just from thinking it. Ugh.

"She's not... I mean I think she even has a boyfriend, but I don't even... I'm not interested in her like that."

"Is there anyone else you might ask out?" she asked.

"Um," You mean other than you, Celeste? No. "So... Willa said a bunch of kids are going to ride roller coasters tomorrow. Can I go? I mean if I can get Jess to go, 'cause I don't want to go alone."

"Yeah, I don't think we have any plans tomorrow, so go have some fun."

“Oh. Thanks.”

Why am I thanking her for telling me I'm not a prisoner? I used to not care what people thought. I swear, if it weren't for the Sloans being in danger if I did it, I'd take off now and the VI would never find me again.

“So, uh, are you... do you want to come tomorrow?”

“No,” she said. “But thank you for asking.”

We got back to the apartment and Celeste disappeared into her bedroom. I could hear her in there, talking to someone at the VI about what our plans in the next few weeks are. After a while she finished her conversation, and I could hear her sigh and slam a book down. A moment later she came in and sat next to me on the sofa.

“Smurfs, huh?” she asked, nodding toward the screen.

“Um...” I reached for the remote. This is embarrassing.

“I prefer the old cartoons like that.” she said. “The new ones just aren't nearly as good.”

“You like cartoons?”

“Sometimes.” she admitted.

“Me too.”

“Yes, I know.” she said, smiling a little. “We should go watch that new animated Disney movie tonight.” she said.

“Um, okay.” I said, startled by the invitation.

“It's getting late,” she said, looking at the time on her phone. “We should grab something to eat before going. Go put something nice on.”

“Um, how nice are we talking?”

“Just one of your dresses will do.”

“Um... okay. I'll be... back in a minute.”

Dinner and a movie. Is this a date? I mean... I mean she didn't say it was, but this sounds very date-like. I mean I'm still not sure she likes me, even, but from what she said before I think she might. And now this, so... so this has to be a date, right? So what do I wear for a date?

I'm being ridiculous, this isn't a date. She's just taking me out because she wants to see that movie and there's nobody else around. People go to movies with friends all the time. I mean we're almost friends, right? So that's all this is. I have got to stop letting my mind stray, she is not interested in me. She would have said so if she was.

I put on the nicest dress I had with me. I hurried to do something with my hair, since I had just thrown it in a pony tail this morning, and I applied a little more makeup. And to top it off, I spritzed a little perfume. Just in case. I mean I know it's not a date, but... well it doesn't mean I should be a slob, right?

Celeste looked very hot in her red dress. It hugged all her curves and her black hair stood out nicely against the bright red. She had gold heels, which *I* personally wouldn't have worn with that dress, but she managed to pull it off.

She didn't even seem to notice what I was wearing. We got into her car and had a very quiet trip to a restaurant that was very packed. Everyone there was much older, and I felt so out of place. And then we got menus and ordered our food and ate without talking. It felt so incredibly awkward.

It was obvious to me by the end of our meal that she doesn't like me,

not even in a friendly way. She didn't talk to me, barely responded when I tried to start a conversation, and never even bothered to look my way when I was talking. I wanted to go home and just, like, die from embarrassment that I ever even thought there was a chance she liked me, but I still had to go to watch a movie with her.

The movie was a complete fail. It sucked, big time. Plus, I never was able to even get comfortable. I was so worried about leaning too close to Celeste and making her think I meant anything by that, or leaning too far away, and her think I meant anything by *that*. She sat so stiff in her seat that I know she was uncomfortable being there with me, too. The whole night had been terrible, and I was glad it was almost over when we walked from the theater.

"The air is cool tonight." she said. It was the most she had said to me in hours.

"Yeah." was my response.

"Let's go down this way." she said, pointing away from the parking lot.

"Uh, it's kinda dark." I said.

"You're scared of the dark?" she asked, smiling.

"No," Sometimes, maybe. "I just... whatever."

We walked about a quarter of a mile away from the theater, to a bridge that overlooked another road. She stood there and watched the cars stream by below, and she was smiling.

"Did you have fun tonight?" I asked. I was just trying to make conversation, because I know she didn't.

"It was nice." she replied. "It's not every day I get to have a night out with a beautiful girl." she said with a laugh. "I don't really have a lot of friends to go out with, and I don't date, so it's rough sometimes."

“You don't date?” I asked. “At all?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

So she takes me to dinner at a nice restaurant, takes me to a movie that I wanted to see, drags me for a nice and sort of romantic walk, and then tells me it's not a date. That's just great. Or maybe she just meant everything before this wasn't a date. Ugh! Why does she have to be so confusing?

“You could.” I said. “Date more, I mean. You're really pretty, and you're nice, and I'm sure you could go out on dates any time you wanted.”

“That's sweet, but it's not that easy. Work tends to get in the way, and my work is very important.”

“But other people work, and they...”

“With the VI I may end up in New York one day, Los Angeles the next, and there is no way anyone deserves to be put at risk like my job would.” She sighed. “There's always the chance that some dangerous creature will pop up and I just can't let someone get hurt.”

“I get that.” I said.

I put Teresa at risk, too. I know I did. But I cared about her too much. I couldn't stand it if Teresa was ever hurt. Especially if it was because of me.

“Maybe you just need someone who already is exposed to all that.” I told her. “That way you're not putting them at additional risk.”

“Yes.” She smiled over at me. “But the VI doesn't permit agents to date each other.”

I'm not an agent. I don't work for them. At least not directly. Does that mean she thinks of this as a date, or not? Should I just ask? I'll just ask.

"Celeste, are we..." I *can't* ask that. "Um... do you think Jess and I will be able to find this striga thing soon?"

"I don't know." She sighed and turned away from me again. "I hope so. I know we don't have much to go on." She looked over at me again. "I was going to wait until Jessica was home to tell you this, but there was another body found."

"Where?"

"In a school locker." she said. She shook her head. "The girl had been dead for a long time when they found her."

"We have to stop this thing."

"Yes." She sighed. "We should get home."

Back to the quiet act as we headed back to the car, then drove to the apartment. She disappeared into her room as soon as we were inside, and I went in to shower and prepare for bed.

I laid in bed, tucking Jenna tightly to me, when Jess laid down in her bed. She was trying to be quiet, probably assuming I was asleep. I just couldn't get there. I couldn't stop thinking of another dead girl.

"There's another dead girl." I whispered.

I whispered all I knew about it, all that Celeste had said. And then I also told her about the evening Celeste and I spent. It was weird to talk about, especially after talking about the dead girl, but I needed advice and Jess was the only one who could give it.

"So what do you think?" I asked, still whispering so there was no

chance of Celeste hearing. "Was it a date?"

"Honey, it all depends on her. I mean it's not a date unless it was meant to be a date, ya know?" she said. "I mean when we go out like that it isn't a date, right?"

"She confuses me so much."

"I know, honey." she said.

"Tell me about your date."

"Roderick." she said, giggling. "He's very sweet. Very strong, too. He has muscles like you wouldn't believe."

"As long as he treats you right." I whispered. "Oh, hey, maybe he can come to World's of Fun with us tomorrow!"

"Where?"

"Willa said a bunch of her friends were going. They like roller coasters. Anyway, you're invited too."

"Sounds good." she said. "Ooh!" she got her phone from the dresser. "I'm inviting a couple of other people." she told me, as she sent a text off. "A couple of my coworkers might like to go." she said, smiling.

Saturday, May 24

When we got to the park, we immediately found Willa and her friends. They came in a van, and it was overflowing with people. I introduced Jess to everyone, and she introduced Roderick, who I had just met five minutes before getting here myself.

“Brynne, this is my little brother, Mikey.” Willa said.

“Hi.” he said, nodding to me, then looking away shyly.

“Hello,” I said. He's so tiny. This is the guy she wanted to set me up with?

“Oh, there are my friends.” Jessica said.

Across the parking lot five girls climbed from a black Toyota. Jess waved at them, they waved back. She introduced them around as we all walked toward the park entrance.

“Oh, and this is Marissa.” Jess told me. “She doesn't work there, she's Miranda's sister.”

Okay, I get it. From the way Jess is looking at me and then at Marissa, and the smile Jess gave me, I can tell. This is another of her set ups. Yay.

At least this girl is cute. About four inches taller than me, blonde, kind of skinny, but very nice curves. And a very cute face with big green eyes. And a nice, kind of shy looking, smile. And dimples. Oh my gosh, she has dimples!

When we first entered the park everyone stayed together and we kind of walked around, stopping for a few minutes to get something to drink. It was cloudy, as Willa predicted, but the sun sometimes would shine out, and that made me nervous. I pointed it out to Jess, just so she'd remember that she also couldn't handle long exposure to the sun.

Willa and most of her friends took off to ride the coasters, but I really wasn't up for that yet. I'm kind of a chicken, I guess. Jess slipped away with Roderick at some point without me noticing. That left me, a girl named Amanda, Mikey, and Marissa, all standing in a group outside one of the buildings. I think there were video games inside, or something.

"We should go grab a burger." Mikey said, scanning each of our faces before lowering his eyes again.

"I'm not really hungry." I told him.

"I'll go." Amanda said eagerly.

"Are you coming, Marissa?" Mikey asked.

"Uh," she glanced at me and smiled. "No, you guys go ahead."

There is a carousel in the center of the park, and we wandered over toward it. I couldn't think of anything to talk about with her, which was bad because I wanted to. I wanted to talk, but my mind wasn't working. We said little things, like, when she told me to go first as we got on the ride, but we didn't talk a lot. She did smile the whole time, though.

"Would you like some ice-cream?" she asked after the carousel.

"Um, sure." I said. "So Jessica works with your sister, right?"

"Yeah, Miranda. She's actually my stepsister."

"Do you two get along okay?"

"We get along pretty well." she said, and she laughed a little. "We were actually friends since probably second grade. My mom and her dad met at one of our soccer games. Next thing ya know, I have a new sister and two new brothers."

"Do you like the new dad?"

"Yeah, he's great."

"And the stepbrothers?"

"I barely know them, really. They're both older. Simon is a senior in college in Arizona and Matthew is married and lives in Nebraska."

I envy them all. Nice, normal lives, no weird vampires or striga, no living for centuries on end while all the people you know die. But at least I have Jessica with me now. So I have a friend with me for thousands of years, but I get to feel guilty that whole time. Yay.

"I used to come here a lot." Marissa said. She handed me my ice-cream that the waitress gave to her instead of me. "My ex and I came once a week last year. Up until the end of July, when we broke up."

"Why did you break up with her?" I asked. "Sorry, that's really personal, I shouldn't..."

"I kinda cheated on him." she admitted. I could tell it upset her a lot.

"Oh, I thought... I mean I figured..."

I took a big bite of ice-cream and tried not to think about how stupid I must look. I just assumed she was gay, I assumed this was a setup by Jess, but she's straight. And a cheater, apparently.

"I just..." she shook her head and sighed. "We weren't right for each other, and I knew it. And then I went with a group of friends, and we were all having fun, and the next thing I know I'm kissing one of the girls and she's pulling me back to her bedroom."

"A girl?"

"I'm not proud of it," she said. "It was the biggest mistake of my life, and I would never ever do something that stupid again." She wiped a tear away. "I hadn't ever been with a girl before that."

"Oh." I bit into the ice-cream again, swallowing a huge chunk and feeling the cold slide down my throat.

"Just so you know," she said. Her face turned red and she looked down. "I would never cheat on you."

"Um,"

"I mean if we ever, like, dated I mean."

"Oh." I swallowed and took that in for a second. "So you are a lesbian?" I asked.

"Bi." she responded.

"So I was right, this was all Jess setting me up again?" I asked. I laughed. "She does that a lot."

"Oh yeah," she laughed along. "Total set up. Miranda does the same thing to me."

"I don't know why they don't just give up." I said.

"I know, right. It never works."

"Never." I said, smiling. "Well, I mean Jess did set me up with my ex, and that kind of worked for a while."

"Miranda set me up with Clay, too. That lasted for almost a year."

"So maybe it does work." I told her.

"Sometimes." she agreed, smiling up at me.

Good then. We've agreed that it sometimes works. I'm glad we've come to that conclusion. I guess this means we're both open to the idea. I mean... well I like what I know about Marissa so far. Other than the prior cheating incident.

“Let's go try something more extreme.” she suggested.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I actually *love* all the roller coasters here.”

“I don't know about the heights.”

“Come on. Give it a try. Please.”

I looked out and saw that it wasn't too sunny, so I agreed. We walked to one of the rides and waited in line for almost an hour before getting to ride. I was so nervous! I don't even know why, I just was.

“It's going to be okay.” Marissa told me. She reached over and grabbed my hand as we started up the chain lift. “Breathe, Brynne.”

“I'm okay.” I said. “I'm okay.” I repeated, trying to convince myself.

“Here we go.”

She held her hands up and screamed as we plunged down the first drop. It was terrifying! And so much fun! We went up and down, zipped around the curve, hit more humps, and we slowed as we rolled into the station again.

We rode all the big rides in the park, and I loved every second of it. Marissa was so much fun to just talk and laugh with. We had a blast, and we spent a lot of time getting to know each other.

“I think our sisters need to start a matchmaking service.” Marissa said.

“Jess is not my sister.” I reminded her.

“Same as.” she said, tugging my hand to pull me closer. “You live with her, you take care of each other, and you're basically family. Right?”

"We are family, sort of." I agreed.

"Anyway, *I* think they've done a good job this time." she said, staring into my eyes. "Don't you?"

"Definitely." I told her. I want to kiss her so much, but it's way too soon. "Speaking of Jess," I said. "I haven't seen her all day."

"I think I saw them heading over that way." Marissa said, pointing. "Let's do one more ride and then we'll go find her."

We didn't have a long wait this time, and we were on the coaster and heading up the lift when I glanced out across the park. I know nobody except Jess and I get quite this view from up here. I can see details nobody else can see.

But right now I see Jess. Roderick is pulling her along by the hand, and there's a look of pain on her face. Her mouth is open, like she wants to scream out, but she can't.

"Jess!" I shouted.

"What are they doing over there?" Marissa asked.

Not quite sure how she knows where they are, but she's right, they are in behind some of the buildings, in an area guests can't get to.

We got to the top of the lift and plunged down the other side. When we got to the top of the next hill, I spun and looked for her. She was tugging, struggling against, him, and he had an evil glare on his face.

Down another hill.

“He's killing her!”

“What?” Marissa asked.

Oh Jess. Oh my gosh, she found the striga! He's killing her, and I can't get off this ride to go help her.

Top of another small hill and I could barely see over everything enough to see her, crumpled on the ground, Roderick standing over her. Is she dead?

When the ride came in to the station, I had tears streaming. I had undone my seatbelt and wiggled free of the lap bar before they even released it. The ride operator shouted something at me as I ran past, but I ignored him and hurried as fast as I could toward where I saw Jessica. I ran past the Fury of The Nile, hearing people remark to each other about the girl who just flew past them. I didn't care if they saw me, they'd probably all forget or just not realize how incredibly fast I was really moving anyway.

I have to get there in time!

I have to!

Hang on Jess!

I finally made it to the Scandinavia section of the park, back by where I last saw Jessica. There she is!

“Jess!” I said, slapping her face lightly. “Wake up.”

"I'll go get help." Marissa said. How did she get here so fast? She turned and ran off.

"Jess." I shook her a little. "Come on, Jessica,"

I could feel her heart beating, and it was very slow. I wasn't sure what happened, but she was still alive at least.

"Rod..." she mumbled.

"Jess!" I hugged her against me. "Thank God! You're going to be okay."

"He's the one, Brynne."

"I know. He's not here now."

"He did this."

"Are you up to standing?" I asked.

"I think so. If you help."

I helped her up, and we started toward the exit. Part of me wanted to run after Roderick, but I knew he would already be gone. He's the striga we've been looking for. How in the world did Jess have the bad luck to find him and actually go out with him? Amazing.

I could have picked Jess up and carried her, but it would have drawn attention. That didn't keep me from basically carrying her as we walked along. So it took us a while.

When Marissa and some medical person from the park found us we were almost to the exit. He tried to examine her, kept asking questions, but she refused any treatment, refused to be checked out. He couldn't exactly force her. She just told him she passed out from low blood sugar, that she'd be fine once I got her home.

“What really happened?” Marissa asked. We were nearly to the car, and the lot was almost empty at this point.

“She passed out.” I told her.

“Right.” she said, suspicious. “Well, I better get going, Miranda and her friends look like they are waiting for me.”

“Wait.” Jess said to her. “Do you have a license?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.”

“I’m not really up to driving, and this one is too young still, so can you drive us home? I’m sure Celeste will give you a ride home once we get there.”

“Yeah, okay. Let me tell Miranda I’m going with you guys.”

She hurried over to their car. She was talking with her hands, rather animatedly, and all five of them turned and looked at us at the same time. Then I heard Marissa tell her sister she’d be careful, so it must have been said rather loudly.

“Anything you want to tell me before she gets back here?” I asked.

“Yeah. If you see him, run the other way, honey. Promise me.”

“Jess,”

“You can’t fight him. He’s strong and he just... he sucks all the energy from you. I think I only survived because there were too many people around and he got spooked.”

“We have to tell Celeste about this right away.”

“Yeah.” she said. “So how do you like Marissa?”

“Don’t change the subject.” I told her. “She’s nice.” I whispered.

I put Jess in the back seat, and I got in the front next to Marissa. She pulled away from the lot and drove out. We were back out on I-435, heading toward the apartment, in a matter of only a few minutes.

“Doing okay back there?” Marissa asked Jessica.

“I’m okay.”

“Good. So, Brynne,” she said, glancing sideways at me. “You don’t have a license?”

“Nope.” I answered.

“You’re too young?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“O-kay. Well, that sucks.” She sighed. “Do you mind if I ask exactly how old you are?”

“Um,” I looked into the back seat at Jess and she shrugged. “I’m fifteen.”

“That might be a problem for me.” she said. “Look, I like you and all, but we just met. You’re only fifteen, I’m eighteen, that’s three years difference.”

“Yeah.” I said. I felt tears in my eyes. “But I’m a really mature fifteen.”

“Oh right.” Jess said. She laughed. “Whatever you say, honey.”

“I am!”

“I don’t know about dating someone so young.” Marissa said. She seemed kind of upset, too. “I’m sorry.”

That sucks. I finally go out on a date with someone, finally start to get over Teresa a little bit, finally start to feel like it has been long enough that I can start to move on, and I’m dumped because I look like a child. I’m over a hundred and fifty years old and she thinks I’m too young.

“I’m not fifteen.” I said. I felt tears rolling out now. “I was born in eighteen...”

“Brynne!” Jess snapped at me.

“Well it’s true!” I shouted back. “Marissa, I’m not... I’m a... a...” It’s no use, she’ll never believe me.

"A what?" she asked. She had an amused look on her face.

"Never mind."

"What were you going to say."

"You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"We're vampires." Jess said. "Only not quite." she added.

I couldn't believe Jessica said that. We're supposed to be hiding it from people. I know I told Teresa, but I was in love with her at the time and thought she deserved to know. And that didn't end well.

There was a long silence.

"That makes a bizarre kind of sense." Marissa said.

"You believe her?" I asked.

"I always have had this weird ability to sense when people are lying to me." she explained. "It's like my own built in lie detector. I can't really explain it. I don't think she's lying."

"Wait, so you believe in vampires?" I asked.

"Why not?" she replied.

"Uh, okay." What a freak. She just believes like that? So easily.

"I read a lot on the internet, and there are some very convincing articles about vampires and all the other monsters in the world. Some of them make too much sense to not be at least partially true. So yeah, okay, you're a vampire."

"I'm not." I said. "I just... kinda am like one."

"You'll have to explain that some time." she said. She gave me a smile. "Maybe on our next date."

"Um, uh, sure."

"Is this Celeste like a coven leader, or something?" she asked.

"No, she... she's... um..."

"A friend of my mother." Jess said.

"That's BS." Marissa said. "What's the real truth?"

"We can't tell you." I said.

"Okay." she nodded. "You don't kill people, do you?"

"No."

"Good." she said. She looked up into the mirror, back at Jess. "So what really happened today? Is it related to the dead body at your work?"

"No." Jess told her.

"That was a vampire." I explained. "Not us."

"Weird that you start there just as that happens." Marissa said to Jess.

"It was quite a coincidence." Jess told her. "Roderick is a striga."

"Jess, you shouldn't..." I began.

"A what?" Marissa asked.

"Um," I guess if Jess wants to tell her all this she may as well know what is really going on. "There have been kids dying around here." I said. "The V... we think it's something called a striga. It literally just sucks the life out of them, leaving no sign that anything happened, other than the dead body. No marks, nothing."

"Why hasn't this been in the news?"

"I don't think anyone has realized all the deaths are related. They're just unexplained deaths, no other link."

"And you just happen to hear of this? And then Jessica, you just happen to go out with this thing? I don't believe that."

"We were searching for it." I said. "To stop it."

"Well, I guess you've found it."

It always makes me suspicious when people are so calm and accepting of things that that should scare them. So now I'm suspicious of Marissa. That isn't the best way to start a relationship. I mean how do I know she isn't a striga, too? I don't. I'm not even sure how I would know, unless she tried that life sucking thing on me.

When we got back to the apartment, I did the whole thing where I hold Jess up as we walked again. Until we got to the apartment where nobody would see, then I hoisted her up and carried her into the bedroom.

“What's going on?” Celeste asked. She looked at Marissa squarely for a few seconds, then back at me. “What's wrong with Jessica?” she asked.

“She found our striga.” I said.

“Really?” Celeste asked, excited. Then she took a deep breath. “I have no idea what you're talking about.” she said. She looked at Marissa for a few more seconds, then said to me “Who is your friend.”

“Oh, hi,” Marissa said. She extended her hand toward Celeste. “I'm Marissa. I assume you're Celeste?”

“Yes.” Celeste said. She looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

“She knows what we are and what we're doing here.” I said.

“You exposed the VI?!” she said, loudly. “I don't care who this girl is, you cannot do that!”

“What is the VI?” Marissa asked.

“I didn't expose you.” I told Celeste.

“So you're telling me you're...” she waved a hand at Marissa. “... whatever she is, just guessed?”

“Okay, well, first you need to back off.” Marissa said, stepping closer to Celeste. “Brynne didn't tell me anything, and I never heard of this VI until *you* said it.” She took another step toward Celeste. “And second of all, I don't appreciate how you are talking to her. I have no idea who you are, lady, or how you know Brynne, but you're going to have to get used to me being around now, and I don't put up with

people yelling at my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend!” Celeste said. She looked at me with an odd, sort of hurt, look on her face. “Are you two dating?”

“Um,” I shrugged. “Seems like it.”

“Guys,” Jess said. We all spun toward her. “I’m really not feeling too well. Could we maybe have this discussion tomorrow, after I’ve slept? I could use some quiet.”

“Come on,” I told Celeste. I stepped toward the bedroom door. “I’ll fill you in in the other room. And maybe you can make a call and get some blood?”

“Yes, right, I can do that.” she agreed.

“You okay alone for now?” I asked Jess.

“As long as Roderick doesn’t show up.” she said.

We went into the living room and Celeste made a call to have some blood delivered. She also called Paolo and told him we had an encounter with the striga, that she would call him back with more details once we had briefed her.

“So who the heck is this girl?” Marissa asked me, nodding toward Celeste.

“Um, I... it’s complicated.”

“Complicated is something I can handle.”

“Who I am is none of your business.” Celeste told her, snapping her phone shut. “And I think it’s time you go.”

“Hey, I’ve taken a lot on faith today, and I’ve tried to be helpful,”

“You have been.” I told her.

“I deserve some answers, I think.”

“You’re just going to have to get used to the idea that you can’t have

the answers you want.” Celeste told her. “Now, is there someone you need to call for a ride, or will you be walking?”

“Stop being rude.” I said. “Marissa, yes, you deserve answers. Really, you're better off not knowing, though.”

“Yes, you are.” Celeste agreed.

“I promise I will tell you everything tomorrow, just let me get some rest and let me make sure Jess is okay and I will tell you everything. My whole life story, if you wish, even.”

“Fine.” Marissa said. “But I'm staying here.”

“Absolutely not.” Celeste told her.

“Celeste, I don't see...”

“Brynne, I don't like this.” she told me. She let out a loud huff. “You shouldn't even be with this girl.”

“What, jealous?” Marissa asked, smiling.

“That *is not* it at all!” Celeste shouted. “I...” she stood and turned toward her bedroom, then stopped and turned back, avoiding looking at me. “Fine, stay. Whatever.” she said. “Don't come whining to me when this goes as badly as Teresa did, Brynne.”

She stomped off to her room and slammed the door. Wow. That was... ridiculously irritating, actually. What, she's so afraid we'll be exposed that she can't be nice?

“Sorry.” I said.

“Who is this girl?”

“We're kind of stuck living here while we look for the striga. She's sort of... I don't know, in charge, maybe.”

“She's your boss?”

“Not exactly. More like... jailer, almost.”

“Well I'm about to put a smack down on this girl if she keeps talking to you like that. Or to me, too.”

“Yeah,” I said, imagining this skinny girl fighting. “That's an interesting visual.” I laughed.

“Hey, I took karate classes when I was younger. I could take her.”

“I'm sure you could.”

“Anyway, back to this promise.” she said. “Tomorrow morning, right? You tell me everything.”

“If you want.”

“I want.” she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward her. “Too soon for a goodnight kiss?” she asked.

“Um,” Wow, she makes her moves, doesn't she. “Yeah, a little.”

“Hug?”

“That I can do.”

Sunday, May 25

I was up most of the night, checking on Jessica every five minutes. She slept through the night, and was mumbling in her sleep about Roderick.

I shook her awake at a little after eight to give her some more blood. She was still very, very weak. I wanted to hunt the guy down and drain his blood for her, but I knew that would be a dumb move right now.

I got her into this. I made her like I am, and now she's in danger. And her family is, too. I'm a cancer. I touch people's lives and infect them, ruining everything.

"How is Jessica?" Celeste asked when I entered the kitchen.

"She'll be okay in a few days, I think."

"I need to talk to you privately this morning," she said, eyeing Marissa across the room. "She needs to leave," she whispered to me.

"She doesn't need to go anywhere. We already told her almost everything, anyway."

"Brynne, you can't trust anybody, especially not some girl you just met and hardly know."

"So you're saying I can't trust you?"

"What?" she asked, surprised look on her face. "It's different."

"We just met." I pointed out. "I hardly know you."

"We're on the same side, we're both trying to stop all these people from dying." Her eyes narrowed. "At least *I* am."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You seem to think hooking up with some stranger..."

“We did not *hook up!*”

I heard Marissa snort across the room. Okay, so our conversation is getting a little loud, and she can hear it all, and now I'm embarrassed. And to think, none of this would have happened if I hadn't decided I cared enough about Jess that I wanted to stick around for a while. I was selfish, and I almost got her killed twice now, and I put the Sloans in horrible danger, and I indentured myself to the Venator Inmortuorum. I should have just moved on, like always.

“Do you want to take off for a while?” Marissa asked. She stood and moved toward us. “I need to get a hair cut, and then maybe we could check a couple of stores? I broke my iPod, so I need to find a replacement.”

“Um...” I said. Celeste was fuming. “Sounds good.”

“What about Jessica?” Celeste asked.

“You'll be here, right? And I don't think that guy even knows where we live, anyway.”

Celeste looked pissed at me. Even pissed, she is beautiful. I wish I could hug her and tell her it's okay, I'll stick around. But I can't ever be with her, and at least Marissa is nice. Maybe she's not the one, but she's someone I find interesting. And cute.

The One was Teresa. I miss her so much. I wonder if she's having a good day. Her parents probably have dragged her to church today, so she's probably sitting there in a pew right now. Maybe quietly texting her new girlfriend while nobody is watching her. I want to rip the new girl's throat out. Only that would hurt Teresa, and I wouldn't do that for anything. Life sucks.

“What do you think?” Marissa asked. We're in Jessica's car again.

“About what?” I asked.

“What should I do to my hair? I'm considering going really short, but I don't know. Do you think it would look okay?”

“How short?” I asked. “On you, maybe shoulder length. Kind of jagged layers, maybe?”

I wonder what Celeste would look like with shorter hair. She's thin and athletic, a short cut would suit her. On the other hand, her hair is gorgeous. I wish she was more interested in me. Of course then I wouldn't be here with Marissa, and I like Marissa. Ugh.

“How did you and Jessica wind up here.”

“We came to find the striga.” I said.

“But why were you looking for it in the first place? I mean why *you*?”

“It's complicated.”

“Well can't you just kind of explain it. If I don't understand, that's okay, but maybe I will.”

“I don't really want to talk about it.”

“Oh. Sure.” she said. She gave me a beautiful smile and her eyes twinkled. “Didn't mean to be nosy. Just trying to find out more about my girl.”

She reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. So I'm her girl? I don't know, something isn't right here. This is really, really fast. I mean Teresa and I hung out as friends for a few days before we decided to date, and even that was fast. I knew from the day I met her that she was going to be special to me, though. I didn't get that same feeling with Marissa. I mean she's nice, I like her, but it's not the same.

I really have got to stop comparing people to Teresa.

After watching Marissa get her hair cut, we headed out to find a new iPod. She stopped and bought me an ice-cream, and then when I

mentioned how much I loved the smell of the popcorn at the theater we walked past, she went inside and bought me a big bucket full. She was being so sweet to me.

"We need to commemorate this," she said, nodding toward the photo booth across from us.

"I don't know if I like having my picture taken too much." I told her.

"Why? Don't be shy," she tugged on my hand. "You're a ten, you have a perfect face." She kissed my hand. "And now it's almost the same shade as your hair." She laughed.

"Sto-op."

"Don't be embarrassed, you're beautiful. You should know this. You should be told this every day, many times a day, until it no longer embarrasses you."

"Well thank you, but I just... but that's not why I didn't want to do it."

"Well what is?"

"I don't know," I shrugged.

I do know, actually. The less tracks I leave behind the easier it is for me to disappear. After just a little while people forget the weird red headed girl when she is no longer there. But with a picture... pictures get out. It makes it easier to find someone. It makes it harder to hide. Self preservation is a big deal when you're like me.

"Please?" she asked softly.

I gave in and we had our picture taken together. At first she leaned over like she was going to kiss me, but I pulled away. We wound up with just basic pictures of us sitting there and smiling. No goofy faces, no awkward kisses, just us smiling. She kept half the pictures and gave me the other half.

"This one is going in my purse," she said. "And this one is going in a frame on my dresser."

"Marissa, I... it's like this; I really am not quite over my ex yet."

"I understand that."

"I just... I need, like, some time for this... I mean... I mean I like you," This isn't working quite right. Be blunt, Brynne. "I don't know if I'm ready to date. I mean... I mean we can do like today," This is awful. I'm dying here. "But I don't want to, um, like kiss or anything."

"Oh." she said, nodding.

"Yet, anyway. I need to work this out in my head."

"Sure, I understand. I totally get it, Brynne, don't worry."

"Sorry." I told her. "I mean if... if you, like, wanted to do something like that, or whatever."

"No, it's fine." Her smile came back out. "Don't worry, we'll just keep going out and having fun until we're both ready for that."

"Um... thanks."

We walked around for a while, and she told me about her family and how they all got along so well. I wish I had a family like that. I mean I did have, back a hundred and fifty years ago. But I don't think we had time to be quite like that, we were always moving around.

"Do you eat human food?" she asked me. She smiled. "I guess based on the evidence from all the snacking that should be obvious."

"I have to eat." I said, eyes darting around to make sure nobody heard her weird question about *human* food.

"Let's grab some tacos, then." she suggested.

She ate five tacos. I've never seen anyone eat five tacos before. It was kind of disgusting and kind of interesting at the same time. Where

could she put that much food? She's thinner than I am. I was only able to eat two. She ate five!

Marissa called her sister and asked her to meet us at the apartment to pick her up. Miranda was waiting for us when we pulled into the parking space.

"I better head home." Marissa told me. She smiled and leaned toward me. "I'll call to say goodnight later on, okay?" she said.

"Yeah,"

She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. The girl has some muscles for her size, I'll give her that. When she let go she backed away about a dozen steps before she turned and headed toward Miranda's car.

"Where have you been?!" Celeste shouted at me the second I entered the apartment. "We have a mission here, and it is not you going out with some skanky..."

"What?" I snapped. "Skanky?" She seriously just called Marissa skanky? "Marissa is a nice..."

"I don't care who she is, I don't care how nice she is, you're letting her divert your attention from the goal."

"Exactly *what* is the goal?"

"To find whoever has been killing children around here."

"It was Roderick. Can we go home now?"

"We don't know it was him yet. And we still have to stop him."

"You said we wouldn't have to do..."

"We still need you to track him." she said, sighing. "It's getting more complicated. When my father quit, he also took the biggest authority

on striga we had with him. Joseph knew more about them than the rest of us combined, but he is loyal to my dad and he left when Dad did.”

“Sorry.” I said. “About your father. You guys will get past this disagreement soon. Maybe when we get the striga. Then everything can go back to normal.”

“I don't know about that. Paolo said my father cleaned out his office and said he wasn't coming back to a place that protected killers.”

“Oh, well, um...”

“I know you're not a killer, Brynne.” she said. “Don't let what he thinks bother you.”

“I am a killer. I *have* killed. I mean I try not to, and I try to make up for all the stuff I've done wrong, but...”

“You've saved far more lives than you've ever taken.”

“That still doesn't atone for the ones I took.”

I sat on the sofa and tried not to think of the face of the man I killed in the alley. The one with the knife. I was so scared someone would find out about me if I stuck around. Maybe he would have lived if I had gotten him help. Or just ran away when he recognized me as the monster I am. Instead, when he came at me with the knife, I fought him. He was no match. I could have avoided all that, and I didn't.

“You're a good person.” Celeste told me. Her hands came down on my shoulders and kneaded. “You were in a couple of impossible situations, but you did the best you could.”

“Tell that to the dead people. Or all the ones I drank from who didn't die. I hurt them. Even if the stuff in my saliva made them forget later on, I attacked them. I violated them.”

“Brynne,”

“I will never be like that again. And if I had my way, nobody would.”

“This is why we have to find the striga.”

“Yeah, we do. And we need to make sure we stop him.” Even if it costs me my life, I will stop him. “Soon.”

I went in to our bedroom and sat on the edge of Jessica's bed. Her hand was cold to the touch when I grabbed it. Her fingers wrapped around mine, but there was no strength there. She opened her eyes and they wandered around before settling on me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Feel any better?”

“Maybe a tiny bit.” she said. Her eyes closed. “How did things go with Marissa today?”

“Don't worry about that, just concentrate on getting...”

“Come on.” she said. She moaned a little. “I'm so bored. I need details.”

“Um,”

Okay, so she's obviously not feeling so awful that she can't worry about my love life. I don't know why she insists on setting me up all the time. I guess it kind of worked this time, at least. And with Teresa.

“We had a lot of fun.”

“Doing what?” she asked.

“Not really anything, just hanging out.”

“Are you going out again?” she asked.

“Well,”

“Ah, you are. I see that smile.”

“What?” What smile? She's being silly. “Well, probably, yeah, but... I mean...”

"You really like her, don't you?"

"She's nice."

"More than that, though, right?" she said. She smiled. "I hope you two find what you had with Teresa, Brynne." She squeezed her fingers around my hand again, and it's still weak feeling. "I feel so bad for you, honey. You have spent so many years alone. You deserve to be happy, and I hope Marissa is the one for you. If she's not, I'll keep trying until I find the right girl for you."

"Jess,"

"And once you find her, honey... well then maybe... maybe you can make her like us."

"No,"

"And you two would have eternity together."

"That can't happen, Jess. I'd never do that to someone, and you know that."

"You say that now, but one day you may change your mind."

"No."

"No?" she said. Her eyes focused hard on mine. "So you don't think you would ever change anyone again? Ever?"

"Never."

"So if I were to fall in love with a guy, we'd just be out of luck? I'd have to watch him get old and die, and wouldn't be able to be with him because..."

"I told you all this!" I shouted. "I *told* you. I told you that I have to watch everyone I ever care about get old and die, that I always have to leave. And you wanted this. You knew what you were getting into, and... and..." I sighed. "I'm sorry."

I dropped her hand and rose from the bed. As I was heading toward the door she kept asking me to stay, but I couldn't. I needed time alone. I went outside and sat in the car so I could have some privacy.

I did this to her. I made her like this, and now she'll be alone. Forever. Never able to have a true love. At least not for long. I should never have done it. I should have waited to see if she would heal and be able to walk. I should have waited to make sure her tumor didn't come back. I mean even if she couldn't have walked, living the rest of her life in a wheel chair would have been very preferable to what I've condemned her to.

Tuesday, May 27

The past two days Celeste has taken me to work at the shelter, then gone home to stay with Jess while I worked. She said it was more important for me to be there than it was for her, so she'd stay with Jessica and make sure she was comfortable.

Jess was really weak yesterday, but today she seems better. Last night she insisted I go out with Marissa rather than stay home with her like I wanted, so I've barely had any time with her at all since she was attacked.

"We think the striga left town." Celeste told me in the car. She just picked me up from the shelter.

"What makes you think that?"

"Paolo said they have surveillance footage of someone matching Roderick's description boarding a plane to Atlanta."

"Teresa lives in Georgia." I said. "I hope she's okay. I should go there and..."

"He got on another plane to Paris the next morning." she told me.

"Oh. Well you can't be certain it is him, there's a lot of people that look kind of similar."

"There have been three bodies found in Paris since then, Brynne."

"But... it's only been a couple of days." He killed two people already in two days!

"We have people there going after him. Don't worry."

Oh I see, we get stuck moving to Kansas City to go after this guy, but when he goes somewhere really interesting then they let others take care of it. That's real fair.

“So Jess and I can go home.” I said, just realizing it.

“Well, no, not yet. There's the matter of the body found at Jessica's work place.”

“Oh. Well I mean... I mean the vampire that did that probably moved on by now, and Jess and I really need to get back home.”

“There have been five bodies in the past month that we think may be from these vampires.”

“Vampires? As in more than one?”

“We think so.”

“But... I mean can't you get someone else to do this? Jess has already been attacked, and we just want to go home. Please, just...”

“It's not my decision, Brynne.” she said. “I wish I could let you guys go home, but I just can't. I'm sorry.” She doesn't sound very sorry.

“So we're just stuck? Until whenever you people decide to let us go? That's nice.”

“You're not...”

“Whatever.”

So we have to stay here until they decide we've found enough killers. Yay. What if they don't exist? Are they going to make us stay then, convinced that we will eventually find the non-existent killers?

Jess was up and walking around in the living room when we got there. So very much better. She was even smiling. I hurried to her and hugged her.

“Wow, it's good to see you up.”

“Yeah, I'm almost back to normal.” she said, squeezing me. “Or what

passes for normal for us, anyway.”

“It would probably be a good idea if you stayed in bed a couple more days to recuperate completely.” Celeste told her.

“No way, huh-uh.” Jess responded. “I want to find that son of a...”

“He's gone.” I told her. She looked angry at that. She really wanted to get back at this guy, I guess. “Paris.”

“Let's go.” she said. “Will they let Brynne travel without a parent?” she asked Celeste.

“We're not allowed to go.” I said, before Celeste could even speak. “Apparently we're still indentured here. To find vampires.”

“Can't we just come back after we slice off Roderick's...”

“We have people taking care of him as we speak, Jessica.” Celeste said. “It's important that we find the vampires who are killing people here, though, and you two are best suited for that.”

This sucks. I just want to go home and watch movies with the Sloans and wallow in my sorrows. Only I guess Marissa is here. So far she's the only one since Teresa who I've really wanted to date. Well, at least who would date me.

I went into the kitchen, phone in hand, trying to contact Marissa. I've been trying all day. I'm not sure what is going on with her. She said she'd call today.

“So if we find these vampires and kill them,” I heard Jess asking. “Can I go after Roderick at that point?”

“Jessica, it's not a good idea for you...”

“I trusted him.” Jess whined. “He was so... believable, and I just... and then... he was such a sweet guy, and he tried to kill me.”

“You can't take him down, Jessica. He's stronger than you are.”

“Is he?” I asked. I stepped back into the room with them. “Is he stronger, or just able to do that whole life-force sucking thingy?”

"It doesn't really matter, he can kill you." Celeste told me.

"Not if he can't get his hands on us, right?" I asked. "I mean he has to have his hand on someone to do his thing, right?"

"I don't know." She sighed. "I *think* that's right, but I wouldn't want to risk your lives on that. It's all academic at this point, he's in Paris and you're here. We have people there who will..."

"Do you have anyone like us there?" Jess asked.

"I don't think we have any more vampires... non-vampires working for us, no." she said. "But we have highly capable agents. They will get him."

"Let's hope so." I said. "Or a lot of people could die."

If they can't stop him, they may be forced to send us over there. I'm not a fan of killing, but I'll make an exception for that ba... guy. What he has been doing to children is horrible. And then he messed with Jess. Nobody messes with my friends and gets away with it.

"So how many striga are there?" Jess asked Celeste.

"We don't really know much about them." she said. "There could be only a few. One thing we do know is that they aren't usually active. It's thought that they'll spend decades in hiding, basically hibernating, before coming out to replenish their strength. Then they'll go back to hibernating for a few decades."

"Good." I said. "How long are they awake for? Maybe he'll just go back to sleep."

"We can't be certain, but we think they are active for several years each time."

"Years?" I said. "Well there goes that plan."

"You girls shouldn't worry about Roderick. Just help us find the vampires here."

"And how do you expect us to do that?" Jess asked her.

“You will have to figure that out. How did you find them before, Brynne?”

“I just, um,” I shrugged. “Kind of wandered around areas *I* would hunt, if I were going to do that, and eventually they found me.”

“You may have to do something like that again. Use your brains, use your senses, and we can do some detective work based on where the bodies were found to try to pinpoint where they may be, also.”

“Uh, the last time I did this... I mean... I want Jess to go home, then.”

“What!?” Jess shouted. “No way, uh-uh.”

“Jess you almost died last time you encountered a vampire. I don't want that to happen again.”

“Yeah, well, I *didn't* die, and I'm much stronger now, since I'm also a vampire.”

“No, you're...”

“Okay, not a vampire, whatever.” she said. “Point is, I can handle myself now.”

“Jess,”

“Besides, you were practically chopped in half, *twice*, and I am not letting you handle this alone.”

“We really need you both here.” Celeste told us.

“It's settled then.” Jess said, that smug look she sometimes gets now on her face. “Do you think guys just don't like foreheads?”

“What?” Celeste asked. She hasn't learned yet that with Jessica you kind of just have to go with these moments.

“I'm sure some guys do.” I told her.

“Did I miss something?” Celeste asked her.

“Okay, so I was reading this article and it said guys like bangs on girls.”

“What does that have to do with...”

“So there must be reason. Do they just not like the look of a girl's forehead?”

“I fail to see how this is relevant to our discussion.” Celeste told her. She seems angry.

Jess shook her head and turned and left the room. I followed. Come on, it doesn't do any good to take things too seriously. You have to just let Jess be Jess, which means a certain amount of randomness.

That evening we called up the Sloans and talked to Peggy and Ted for a while. They are doing good, but are worried about us. They are really kind of like parents to me. Adopted parents, of sorts. They will never replace my real parents, but my real parents have been dead for a century and a half almost, and I sometimes have a hard time remember a lot about them.

Right before bed I tried to call Marissa again. Still no answer. I'm not sure what is going on. I hope she's alright. Maybe I've been dumped. Maybe me being a *non*-vampire is just too much for her. Probably for the best that she dump me now, if that's the case. I can't take another heartbreak like with Teresa.

I wonder if Teresa ever thinks of me. I mean I know she's dating someone else and probably quite happy, but I know what we had was real. She can't be over it so easily, can she?

“Am I that easy to get over?” I wondered aloud.

“No, honey, she just couldn't be with you.” Jess answered.

I guess she knew what I was thinking when she heard me ask. One thing about having such a close friend is that we can usually pick up on each others' thoughts pretty quickly. That has upsides and downsides to it.

"Maybe if I just put a message on her blog..."

"Brynnne, you have to let her go. She can't handle it."

"I know, but..."

"Don't you want her to be able to go on and be happy? Even if it's not with you?"

"No." It's the truth.

"Brynnne,"

"I want her to be happy. I just want her to come back to me." I sniffled and wiped at my cheeks. "But yeah," I sighed. "If I can't be the one to make her happy, I want her to find someone who can."

"I know."

"It still sucks."

"But hey, you're moving on too. You have Marissa now."

"Who won't answer her phone and hasn't called."

"I'm sure she just had something come up."

"I hope she's okay."

I laid there in bed, thinking about Teresa and Marissa, wondering why things have gone the way they have. Maybe I really don't deserve to be happy. Maybe romantic happiness will always evade me because I am unworthy, because I haven't completely atoned for the evils I've done. It took me forever to come out, and now nothing is going right. The first girlfriend dumps me because I'm an almost vampire, a *non-vampire* in Celeste's terms. Now the second one seems to really not be all that into me. The only other lesbian I've ever been interested in at all is Celeste, and she doesn't seem to even like me most of the time.

Speaking of Celeste, I can hear her talking to her father on the phone in the other room. She is trying to get him to come back, but she also

keeps telling him she won't send us away, that the mission is too important. At least he answered her call. She's been trying to contact him for days.

Wednesday, May 28

I woke to the smell of warm toast smothered in butter. Oh, it smelled so very good. I made my way into the kitchen, where I found Jessica and Celeste munching away on their breakfast.

“Good, I was about to wake you up.” Celeste said.

“Morning.” I mumbled. “I don't suppose...”

“There's the bread, knock yourself out.” she said, pointing.

“Um, thanks.” I sighed. “I actually may be needing some blood soon.”

“Oh.” She looked down at her toast and frowned. She swallowed the remaining bit in her mouth, then laid the toast on the plate. “Well, I think I'm done eating now.” she said. “More blood? It hasn't been that long, has it?”

“No, but...”

“We need to be at full strength,” Jess told her. “In case we find the vamps.”

“Oh. I'll see what I can do.” Celeste told her.

“Thanks.” I said. I put slices of bread in the toaster. “It's actually been a few weeks.” I mumbled.

“So long?” Celeste asked. “But the other night we had some delivered.”

“They only sent enough for Jess.”

“Inconsiderate idiots.” Jess mumbled.

“I'll get you some soon, Brynne. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

We spent a while coming up with a plan to search for the vampires

here. Night always works best. We can't handle the sun, anyway, and we know they can't, so that's what we'll do.

“And don't worry about work.” Celeste told Jessica. “You concentrate on this full time now.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jess said.

“And the same goes for you.” Celeste said to me.

“Okay.” I nodded. “I might actually miss Willa.”

“But not Ingrid?” she asked, smiling.

“Uh... no.”

Friday, May 30

I was getting bored with the idea of wandering around Kansas City at night, hoping to stumble upon the vampires that were killing people. It has only been a couple of nights, but it gets so boring.

"I know this worked with Julius and Joanna, but they weren't exactly top of the class, ya know." I said to Jess. We were walking through yet another rough neighborhood.

"We just need to keep at it."

"I guess." I said.

She's so intent on finding the others and stopping them. I want to too, but I don't know how I feel about Jess being in harm's way while we do that. I'd feel so much better if she would just stay home. But she insists on coming out, and I can't forcibly stop her, so I'm doing my best to protect her by staying by her side, even though she swears we'd find them quicker if we split up.

"Did Miranda say anything the last time you spoke to her?" I asked.

"Brynne, I don't know what to tell you, honey. Marissa is obviously just being a jerk at this point."

"I just wish she'd answer my calls."

"I'm sorry I even introduced you to her."

Nothing. Not a single call, and she won't answer mine. Not a text, even. Not any indication that she's still alive. Maybe she's not, maybe the vampires got to her too. I doubt it.

"Maybe I'm just not that interesting."

“Yeah, you're *so boring!*” she said, rolling her eyes. “The girl has problems, honey, that's all this is.”

“Maybe she's just sick and in the hospital.”

“Maybe.”

Is it wrong that I hope she has taken ill and can't answer her phone because of that? Or she was arrested for something, and she is sitting in a jail cell somewhere? Though I can't think of anything they could arrest her for. She doesn't exactly come across as a hardened criminal.

We turned and headed back the way we came, so we could get home. The sun was starting to come up in the east, so prime hunting time was over.

My phone rang. Both Jess and I stopped as I pulled it from the back pocket of my shorts. We stared at the screen for a second when I held it out in front of me. Not Marissa. Darn it.

“Celeste?” I said into the phone.

“They just found another body.” she said. “In the west part of Overland Park. Can you get there?”

“It'll be a while.” Jess answered.

“I thought if you could get there quickly you two might find them.”

“We can head that way.” I told her. “They're probably already gone, but we can kind of check around a little.”

“At least until it gets too sunny.” Jess added.

We stopped a couple of blocks away from where the yard was cordoned off with police tape. There were officers everywhere. We could hear them talking about the body they found. It was a jumbled mix, but I made out some details.

“Julie Smith.” I told Celeste over the phone. “Exsanguination.” I added. “The detective thinks this was an animal attack.”

“Typical.” she replied. “Someone has no blood left, there's a bite mark, so they assume an animal did it. It's no wonder we have a hard time finding you people sometimes.”

“Don't include *us* in this.” Jess told her.

“Check around as best you can before coming home.” Celeste ordered, then hung up.

Jess and I checked all the shadowy, bushy areas within a half mile radius, but found nothing. But as we were heading back to the car, some teenage boy waved us over. I reluctantly followed Jess over toward him.

“You two looking for someone?” he asked.

“What's it to you, twerp?” Jess asked.

“Just a question.” he said. “So what can I call you two?”

“Call us nothing, we're leaving.”

“Now wait, hold on, I just was curious who I was talking to.”

“Jessica.” she said, shaking her head. “Do you know anything, or not?”

“And you?” he asked, staring at me.

“Um, I'm...”

“She's Brynne, and if you have anything to tell us you need to spit it out quickly.”

“Don't be so rude.” I said.

“Sunlight, hon.” she said, looking up.

She's right, we can't be out here much longer. Which also means the vampires can't, either. Apparently we're actually better able than most to walk in the sun, so if we have to go in there is a very good chance they did so long ago.

"blonde girl, about yay tall," the boy said. "Kinda hot,"

"Whatever." Jess said.

"If she wasn't covered in blood, that is." he quickly added.

"You saw a girl covered in blood?" I asked, just making sure I heard that right.

"Yeah."

"Oh." I looked over at Jess and saw that she was interested now, too. "Well did the cops come ask any..."

"Man, I ain't helping the cops with anything." he said, angry. "They don't help us, why should we help them?"

"So, um, what about the blonde?" I asked.

"She headed into the brush over there." He pointed. "I think the girl is crazy, really."

"Probably."

"She on something?" he asked. "I figured as hard as you two were looking, she must be a friend or something."

"Or something." Jess said.

"Yeah, uh," I said, searching for something to tell him. "She called, she took something and was confused and disoriented. She couldn't find her way home."

"I heard that." he said. "She the one who offed the girl up the road?"

"I..."

"We don't know anything about that." Jess told him.

"Right. Nobody never does. Not my business, anyway."

“Thank you for your help, uh...” I said.

“Yeah, that ain't happening.” he said, turning away. I guess he doesn't feel comfortable giving his name.

We searched the trees he had pointed out. We didn't find any blonde vampire, but there was blood. We missed it before, somehow. There wasn't much, and the area smelled so awful that it rendered any chance of us picking up the blood odor an impossibility. But there were a couple of smears. At least now we know the vampire is a blonde woman.

We finally had to head back to the apartment. We were dead tired, and the sun was bright enough that it was going to cause us problems if we stayed out in it for very long.

Saturday, May 31

After another night and early morning of searching, I was tired and couldn't sleep. Jessica was snoring away, but I couldn't get my brain to shut down. I went out into the living room to watch cartoons. I leaned back on the sofa and watched some mindless thing that I swear talks down to kids in the most annoying way.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" Celeste asked.

"Can't." I mumbled.

I didn't even hear her come in, so I guess I'm really out of it right now. I just want to sleep. Why can't I sleep? And why does that chicken and rice she has there smell so good?

"There's more, if you want some." she said, apparently noticing me staring at her food.

"I'm too tired to eat."

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I do." She sat next to me and reached over and patted my shoulder. "Whatever it is, it's going to be alright."

"I hope so."

If I could pinpoint exactly what was bothering me I could probably deal with it better, but I really just don't know. I wish I hadn't brought my doll in here with me. It's kind of embarrassing.

"So, um, why do you think..." I said. I slid Jenna to the opposite side from Celeste and laid her on the sofa. "I mean..." I paused to try to hold back the tears that were threatening. "Marissa won't even answer my texts."

"I don't know, Brynne." she said.

"Did I do something, you think? I mean... I mean she seemed okay with what I am, so I don't *think* that's it."

"I wish..."

"But Teresa was okay with it, too, right up until she wasn't." The tears escaped my eyes. "I miss her so much, ya know? And... but I thought there was a chance with Marissa. At least a little. I just... I mean am I going to be alone forever?"

"Someone will come along who..."

"Nobody is ever going to want me."

"That's not true at all." she said.

She put her arms around me and pulled me into a hug. I cried on her shoulder while she rubbed my back and kept telling me to let it out. After a while I finally was able to rein in the tears a little.

"I am so sorry." I said. I pushed back away from her a little, but she held on.

"Don't be. It's okay."

"It's not, I shouldn't whine to you like this."

"You can talk to me any time, Brynne." she said, still not letting go of me.

"I just don't want to be alone anymore." I mumbled. "But there's nobody who would ever really want to date me, knowing what I am."

"You are not a monster." she said. She pulled me tighter. "There is someone who wants to date you."

She squeezed me and held me. There is someone? Who? I just know I feel really good in her arms right now. I wish it were her who wanted to date me.

"I better go lay down and at least try to sleep."

"That's a good idea." she said, finally letting me go.

"Thanks, um, for... ya know."

"Any time." she told me. I started to step away, but she grabbed my hand. "Don't forget your doll."

"Oh." I said. I could feel myself blushing. "Thanks."

I picked Jenna up and made my way to the bedroom, where I laid awake for a couple more hours. I couldn't stop wondering if Celeste really does like me. She sometimes acts like it. The way she talks to me, the looks she gives me, even the way she held me in there. But I can never be sure with her. And I do have a girlfriend. Maybe.

After a horrible nightmare about Barney being eaten by a crocodile, I woke to the smell of spaghetti sauce wafting in from the kitchen. When I made my way in there, sans Jenna this time, I saw Jessica and Celeste just setting the table.

"Sleep well?" Celeste asked.

"Not really." I replied.

"I think you two need a night off. I don't want you out searching tonight. Take a break, have some fun."

"That's great," Jess said. "Brynne, you wanna come with me to the mall? I need some new jeans."

"I don't really feel like shopping."

"Wow! Really?" She reached over and felt my forehead. "No fever. Hm."

"I'm just tired."

“Well do you need me to stick around?” Jess asked me.

“No, go ahead and go.”

“Okay, I'll call Miranda and see if she'll go.”

“Um, ask... no, don't, actually.”

“Honey, I'm sure there is a good explanation for Marissa not answering. I'll try to find out.”

“No. Don't even bring it up. I'm done with her.”

“It's for the best, anyway.” Celeste said.

We ate quickly, and I helped with the dishes while Jess took off to go shopping with Miranda. At least she answers her phone, unlike her sister. Marissa is such a bitch. I can't believe I just said that! Well, *thought* that.

“What are you smiling about?” Celeste asked.

“No, nothing, just something weird in my head is all.” I put the last plate in the dishwasher. “We also need to do some laundry.”

“I can take care of that. You can go back to bed, if you want to.”

“Thanks.”

I sat at the table instead, and watched as Celeste filled the dishwasher with soap and turned it on. Then she went to get the laundry.

“Do you want to go to another movie with me?” I asked.

“Sure, that sounds like fun.”

“Great. Let me go get dressed and we can go.”

“Kind of early, isn't it?”

“Not by the time we get there. Besides, we can walk around and talk for a while, or maybe grab a coffee or something.”

I hurried to get dressed, putting on a nice little dress that shows off what figure I have, topping that with a little lace button up shirt, which I didn't button, and adding a pair of cute shoes.

“My dad isn't a bad guy.” Celeste said. We were walking around, waiting to go to the theater until closer to start time, and she was sipping at a hot coffee. “He just has this set idea that anything, or anyone, not completely human is pure evil.”

“I mostly agree with him.”

“Well I don't, at least not completely.” She said. She reached out and touched my arm. “Obviously.”

“So you're okay with what I've done in the past?” I asked.

“You've done some things, but it's been so long, and you have made up for it.” She smiled at me. “You are a very kind, gentle person. I don't think you're evil at all.”

“Thank you.”

She finally seemed comfortable around me, I thought. She has rarely shown that. Gosh I really like her. I don't know, maybe coming to a movie together was a bad idea. It makes me see what I miss so much with Marissa right now. It also makes me remember what Teresa and I had. I want that again, so badly.

The movie was a cheesy romance. About halfway through I reached over and grabbed onto her hand, and she let me. We didn't say anything, and I didn't look to see how she was reacting, we just held hands.

The ride home was a little awkward, I think. I mean I was scared that

I had crossed the line, that she would now decide that she hates me. She wasn't talking at all, which made it worse. But she did smile at me a couple of times, and each time I felt okay for a minute.

"I'm going to grab a beer." she said when we got into the apartment. "Do you want to watch something?" She motioned toward the television.

"Um, yeah, sure."

I flipped the television to a kids show out of habit, but then realized I should probably pick something Celeste would like, so I found another movie. And then she came in and sat next to me.

"Hey," she said.

"Um," I looked up at her. She is so beautiful, her flowing black hair framing her face just right tonight.

"Thank you for inviting me to the movie."

"My pleasure." I said. I reached out for her hand. "We'll have to do it again sometime."

I knew I had definitely crossed the line by then. But that also meant there was no going back. I was ready for her to yank her hand away and tell me off, but instead she smiled.

"We should." she agreed.

"Celeste," I leaned toward her. "You look so beautiful tonight."

"Oh, uh," she said.

I leaned the rest of the way in and kissed her. She has the softest lips I

have ever felt. As my tongue darted out slightly I could taste her lip gloss. I was in heaven just then. But... she wasn't responding.

"I..." I scooted way back, very quickly. "I shouldn't... have... um,"

"No, you shouldn't." she said.

I snuck a glance and could see that she was staring at the floor like I was, and she had a reddish tint to her cheeks now too. And... and I think she liked that I kissed her. She doesn't seem repulsed, at least.

"I mean... I mean maybe after we catch these other..."

"Brynne," She sighed. "It's not that I don't think you're a lovely girl."

"Oh."

"And it's not that I don't want to."

"Oh," I said, feeling a sudden rush of excitement.

"But I work with you,"

"And you don't date people you work with." I finished for her.

"That isn't it." she whispered. "You're a child, Brynne."

"I... I... oh."

"But then again, you're not!" she said, forcefully. She stood. "I have to think about this."

"What's to think..."

"You're a hundred and fifty years old, not a child! And if I like you then... but no, I have to be reasonable."

"You don't have to." I said softly.

"I have to think."

She stormed off to her room. Great. I'm a child. The fact that I carry my little doll out here to watch cartoons probably isn't helping. It's not my fault that I barely age, though. It isn't fair. I really like her.

I am such an idiot. I actually kissed her.

Oh, just kill me now.

I don't know what I was thinking! I mean there is no way this could ever work out, even if she did like me the same way I like her. And I have a girlfriend! Well, sort of. Maybe. I really have no clue at this point.

Sunday, June 1

I didn't sleep, just laid there and cried all night. Jess tried to get me to talk, but I wouldn't. Eventually she went to sleep and left me alone so I could wallow in my self loathing.

A new day didn't make things better. Celeste and Jessica were chatting happily as we all ate an early lunch together, but I could barely bring myself to look up at them. I mean I did, but any time they looked my way I had to turn my head. I feel so embarrassed about last night.

Celeste was very curt with me. She wasn't rude, exactly, but she seemed like she was saying only the absolute minimum that she had to say to me. And she got a kind of angry look on her face when our hands touched as she was taking my plate when clearing the table.

I just should go find Roderick and let him suck all the life from me. Maybe he'd end it quickly.

I wonder what Teresa is doing right now. Maybe she's out having fun with the new girlfriend, enjoying a picnic in the sun, swimming at the pool, or even just laying out and getting a tan. All things she could never do with me. Love sucks.

"I'm going to go walk around for a while." I told Celeste and Jessica. "Maybe I'll stumble across our vampires."

"Hang on, let me get my shoes." Jess said.

"I kinda need to be alone."

"But Brynne,"

"Let her go, Jessica." Celeste told her.

“But it could be dangerous if she actually does stumble across...”

“I'm sure she'll be careful.”

“Well be back early.” Jess told me. “Mom and Dad are coming up to visit us. They want to take us to dinner.”

“If I'm not back, just go without me.”

I walked around, not even bothering to stay out of the sun. The thought occurred to me that maybe I could just get a bad enough sun burn that I'd die from it, but then I realized the sun wasn't all that bright today, so I'd just end up in a lot of pain if I didn't watch it. I started staying to the shadows as much as I could at that point.

I walked through neighborhoods I'm pretty sure no girl my age and size should actually walk through alone. There are some really seedy places up here. Not once did anyone even approach me, though. In fact, three little kids crossed the street to avoid me. 'cause, ya know, I'm all intimidating and stuff.

There was a fountain in front of some building, and it was so peaceful and tranquil that I decided to sit and watch it for a while. If only the rest of my life could be as simple as that. The water splashed in a gentle rhythm that was very relaxing.

I didn't realize how long I had been sitting there until my phone rang. I pulled it out immediately, a part of me hoping it was Marissa and a part of me praying it wasn't. And a small part of me thought just maybe Celeste had come to the conclusion that we could be together. Instead it was Peggy.

“Hello,” I said into the phone.

“We're here at the apartment Are you nearby?”

“Um,” I glanced around. “Not really.”

"We need to head back to Hanton tonight, Brynne, and we may not be able to make it back up here for a few weeks."

"That's okay, you guys go to dinner without me." I told her.

"Jessica tells me you're having a bad day."

"Jess should mind her own business sometimes."

"She's just looking out for you." she said. That's true, I know it is, but I need time alone. "Why don't you tell me where you are and I can come pick you up. Then we can come back for the others and all head out to the restaurant."

"I don't really think..."

"Just tell me where you are." she said. More like demanded.

I told her the streets that crossed at the nearest intersection so she could enter it into her GPS, and then I went to the corner and waited twenty minutes for her to arrive.

"There you are." she said. "Hop in, let's get back."

"Thank you for picking me up." I said.

"So tell me what is bothering you." she said, going right after the one thing I didn't want to discuss.

"Just personal stuff."

"I see." she said, nodding.

No, she doesn't see. Nobody sees. Ever. Nobody ever will. Every time I like someone, they suddenly think I'm not worth the effort.

"In the past year I think we've gotten close, haven't we?" she asked. I nodded when she looked over at me. "With you living with us, being there all the time, you've become part of our family."

"Thank you for saying that." I said. I felt tears welling up. I do love

them all.

"I think of you as a second daughter, Brynne. And I'm always going to love you and want the best for you."

"You're all so much better than I deserve."

"Nonsense. Now, that being said, talk to me. Like you would your mother."

Like I would my mother. I would never have told my mother anything that has gone on. Never. Times were different. She would have killed me just for Teresa, even before I had a chance to mention anything else that has gone on.

"I don't know if I can." I whispered.

"Okay."

She pulled to the side of the road and turned the car off. After that, she undid her seat belt and leaned over and hugged me. That was it, I just let the tears flow and started telling her everything. It was embarrassing, and easy, all at the same time. The only reason I could even say it is because I trust her completely.

"Brynne, you're fifteen."

"Give or take a century or so." I said.

"I remember fifteen. I was even younger than you the first time I had my heart ripped out and torn to shreds. Some boy whose name I can't even remember now, but who I had fallen for at the time, just flat out told me in front of everyone that he didn't like me."

"It's not the same."

"It is the same. I got over him, whatever his name is, in a few weeks. And got crushed all over again by a different boy later on. It's how it works."

“Marissa won't answer my calls.”

“Then you move on.” she said. “You'll find someone special some day.”

“I already did. She left me.”

“I know, Brynne, but...”

“You don't! You married your soul mate, mine left me because I'm a hideous creature.”

“You have a lot of time to find...”

“I'm sick of having a lot of time! I get so sick of... of living!” I shouted.

“I want a normal, eighty year lifespan. I want to age at the same rate as Teresa does, I want to be normal, like Teresa is, and I want, more than anything, Teresa.”

Well there, I laid that all out. It's true. Marissa was never going to be anything other than a time filler. She was never going to be all that special to me. So why worry that she won't talk to me? Who cares?

“What about Celeste?” Peggy asked.

“What about her?”

“Jessica said...”

“Jess has a big mouth!” I snapped.

“She's trying to help.”

“I don't need...”

“I know. But you're part of our family, and that makes her the big sister. So she feels like she has to look out for you.”

Ha, shows what she knows. Jess was trying to look out for me before I ever came to live with them. Before I told her I'm a monster, even.

“Okay, well,” I sighed. “What do you want to know?”

“Jessica said you like this woman.”

“So?”

“Do you?”

“Um,” I shrugged.

“Isn't she a little too old for you?”

“That's kind of what she said.” I told Peggy, as my tears picked back up again. “Last night, when I...” Oh well, here goes. “When I kissed her.”

“You kissed her?” Peggy asked, sounding really skeptical. “Did she know you liked her before she kissed you?”

“I kissed *her*.” I said. I feel so embarrassed. “And she stopped me.”

“Oh.”

“Because I'm a child.”

“Oh.” she said. She actually sounds happy about that. “Well you really should be looking for people your own age.”

“In the graveyard, maybe? Or is there some secret facility where they keep people alive for a couple of centuries?”

“You're fifteen. You may be stuck that way for a long time, but you *are* fifteen.”

“I don't even know why we're talking about this! Can we just go?”

“We're talking about this because I don't think it's right for you to be dating an adult woman. You're not old enough.”

“Well the point is moot, anyway, so don't worry. She hates me. She wouldn't even make eye contact with me today.”

“I'm sure she doesn't hate you.” she assured me.

“It doesn't matter.”

“Brynne,”

“Look, I...” I sighed and wiped at my eyes. “I understand what she is saying, and I... I mean I get it. And I will be okay.” Once my heart somehow seals itself back together over Teresa ripping it apart, maybe. If that ever happens. “I just don't want to talk about it anymore. Please.”

“Well you can always call me and talk to me. Any time, okay?”

“I know.”

She put her seat belt back on and pulled back into the road. I know she thinks she can help, but... ya know, actually, I do kind of feel a little better. Just knowing she's there for me, supports me, thinks of me like a daughter.

“Thank you.” I told her. I couldn't exactly articulate what I was thanking her for, but she smiled and nodded.

My parents were never like these people. I know it was a different world, and they had a harsher time, but my mother would never have tried to talk to me about this kind of stuff. Even if it was about boys and not girls.

When we got back to the apartment I grabbed onto Peggy's hand and wouldn't let her leave the car for a minute. She patiently waited as I worked to keep from crying and tried to come up with some way to say what I wanted to say.

“I just...” I have no idea what I want to say here. “Just... thanks.”

“You're welcome.” she said, patting my hand.

“You are like a mother to me.” I told her, sniffing. “And I love you guys. You're the only family I have, and... so, um, just... thanks.”

“We love you, honey.”

I let her go and we went inside. Jess was giving me an angry look when I got in there, and I don't even know why. Maybe she's upset that I wandered off and didn't come back in time, I don't know.

Our meal was very nice. I was able to kind of relax and enjoy a nice chat about things with them, with my family. It does feel nice to know I actually have a family. I've been all alone for so long, and now I'm not.

It was hard when they left at the end of the night. I felt like I still needed a little more support, and Peggy was great at that. But I knew we'd see them soon, and we would talk to them on the phone. Jess and I can probably go back down there to visit next week, even.

"We have to catch these vampires soon." I told Jess. We were laying in our beds.

"I know, right."

"I miss your parents. Even Barney."

"I miss our bedroom."

I don't think she even understands how great her family really is. She never had any other, so they've always just been there. But I can see how special they are.

"Peggy said she thinks of me as a second daughter." I whispered.

"Yeah, I kinda get that."

"I feel so lucky. Honored."

"Brynne, you know whatever it is that has been bothering you the past few days, you can talk to me, right?" she said.

"I have talked to you about..."

“You have? I mean we've talked, but it seems like you're holding something back from me.”

“I'm okay. Just a lot going on in my head, that's all.”

“The invitation is always open, honey. Even if it's something you don't think I want to hear, I'll deal with it. No judging, no hassling. I promise.”

“I know. Thank you.”

Monday, June 2

I woke to my phone ringing. I slid out of bed and looked at it for a moment before answering. Marissa.

“Hey,” I said.

“Brynn! Oh, it's so good to hear your voice.”

“I've been calling you.”

“My phone was dead. We went to visit my grandmother in St. Louis, and I forgot my charger.”

“You never mentioned you'd be gone all...”

“My mom didn't tell me until the last minute, and we were only supposed to be there the one day.” she said. “But my grandma got sick and we had to stay.”

“Miranda didn't go with you?”

“No, it's my grandma on my mom's side and she still isn't too happy with my step father, so Mom thought it would be best if just the two of us went.”

“Miranda didn't say anything to Jess when they...”

“Are you sure? She said she did.”

“No, she...”

“Is there any reason Jess wouldn't tell you?”

“What reason could there possibly be for her not telling me?”

“I don't know, she's your friend, not mine. You tell me.” she said. She sounds angry.

Jess would definitely tell me. I don't know what happened there. She wouldn't forget. I mean not after seeing how upset I've been about

Marissa not being around. No, Jess would tell me. So Miranda is lying if she said she told Jess. But there is no point in me starting that argument right now.

“So,” she said. She didn't continue.

“So?”

“Should I come over?”

“Um,”

I am so mad at her right now. Except if her grandma really was sick it was very nice of Marissa and her mother to stay and take care of her grandma. It was horrible that she didn't call, or text, or make sure that I had been told, but we did just start dating. It's not like we had plans, or anything.

“I guess.” I said.

“Wow, way to sound all enthusiastic about seeing me. Never mind.”

“No, I just... come over.”

“That's okay, if you aren't interested in spending time with me I can find other things to do.”

“I want you to come over.” I told her.

“Not so sure you mean that.”

“I do. Please.” Okay, somehow I wind up practically begging her to come?

“I don't know. I might come, I'm not sure yet.” she whined.

“Marissa,”

“I'll talk to you later. Bye.”

She hung up on me before I could say goodbye. Great. She ignores me for a week, even if she had a good reason, and I end up being the one who feels bad for not being super excited the second she shows back up. I mean I think I had a good reason to be upset with her. Didn't I? I don't know anymore.

Maybe I should just take a long break from girls. Not even think of dating. Just forget the very possibility. I did it for over a century, I could do it again. Except there's Teresa. I can't stop thinking of her, obsessing about her, and I'm never going to unless I can either distract myself with someone else or find someone who I like as much.

I don't know how Jess slept through the phone. Apparently she is a much deeper sleeper than I thought. I figured since I changed her she would be a light sleeper, like I am, but she really is a deep sleeper.

Celeste wasn't around, so I had breakfast alone. After eating, and cleaning my dishes, I sat on the sofa and watched cartoons.

"Do I smell food?" Jess asked.

"Not unless it's cereal." I told her.

"Huh. Someone made eggs somewhere." she mumbled.

"I don't smell it. My nose is a little clogged today."

"Huh. Anyway, I think I'm going to try cooking something. Wish me luck."

"Good luck."

"Should I make enough for you, too?"

"I had Cheerios."

Jess began making sausage. It's kind of funny to see her cook. I mean she isn't... she doesn't seem that domestic, ya know? I went in and watched as she scooped the last piece onto her plate.

“Hey Jess,”

“Hm?” she asked, her mouth full.

“Are you sure Miranda didn't say something about Marissa being out of town?”

“She never told me anything, honey. I would have told you if she had.” she said, taking another nibble.

“Yeah, I know.”

“She's out of town?”

“Yeah, she called me earlier. She said she was visiting her grandma, but they are back now.”

“What, and she couldn't answer her damn phone?” she asked, her forehead crinkled.

“She said she forgot her charger.”

“Right. Sure.” She shook her head. “And you believe that sh... crap?”

“I don't know. I mean I guess.”

“Honey, you deserve better treatment than that. If she cared at all about you she would have at least called once.”

“She said...”

“Well even if her phone was dead, she could have made sure Miranda got a message to you to let you know what was going on. She just didn't give any thought to your feelings at all, and that is not acceptable.”

“Jess, she just...”

“She's just a self centered, thoughtless bitch.”

“Hey, that's not very nice.”

“Ya think?” she snapped. “You need to tell her to get lost.”

“Jess,”

"I'm serious. And if you don't then you're the one being stupid."

"I..."

Great. That's what I needed, my best friend being grouchy with me and making me feel even worse. Ya, I know my girlfriend wasn't exactly thinking of me when she didn't call. I *am* mad about that, but I'm not ready to write her off for it. Jess just needs to mind her own business on this one.

Less than an hour later Marissa showed up. When I answered the door she acted like everything was normal, that nothing had happened at all. And maybe that's the best way to handle it. Just move forward and not think about the past week.

"I've missed you." I told her.

"Me too, Brynne." She hugged me again. "But I'm here now."

"Yeah. Want to just hang out here for a while, then maybe get some lunch later?"

"Sounds good." she said.

"Oh, look who's here." Jess said. She was standing by the sofa.

"Hi, Jessica." Marissa said, smiling.

"Did you apologize?" Jess asked.

"Don't." I warned.

"Did you even think about Brynne one time during the past week?"

"Jess!"

"She's all I thought about." Marissa said, squeezing my hand. "All week. That is why I had Miranda tell you where I was, so Brynne wouldn't worry."

"Miranda never said one word."

"She said she told you, and she wouldn't lie to me."

"So now you're accusing *me* of lying?" Jess asked.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, I'm just saying Miranda told me she told you." she shrugged. "Maybe you didn't hear her, or you misunderstood what she said, or..."

"Or she never said anything."

"Jess, can we just drop it?" I asked.

"Fine. I'm going out, I won't be back until late."

"Where are you going?"

"First I'm going to talk to Miranda to find out which one of them is lying." she said. She pointed at Marissa. "You better hope it was her."

"Hey!" I stepped in front of her. "Just back off, okay?"

"Brynne, you deserve so much better than this little..."

"I don't understand why you're mad at me." Marissa said.

"You..." Jess said. She sighed. "Brynne, I'll be back later so we can start searching for the vampires."

We sat in the living room, music playing on the television, and tried to talk. Except there wasn't a lot to talk about. My brain kind of just went blank, to top it all off.

"So, um," I said, and couldn't think of anything to follow it up with.

"What have you been up to in my absence?" she asked me.

"Nothing much."

"I'm sorry. We were there, and my grandma is just really not doing well. And when she saw me she said it made her feel better. I'm her only granddaughter, and she kept saying she was going to die if we didn't stick around, that she needed our support. I mean she was being over-dramatic, obviously, but you should have seen her, Brynne."

"I..."

"We couldn't leave her like that."

"I understand."

"I feel bad for not calling."

"Oh, you have company." Celeste said. She was just coming in the door. "Oh, it's *you*," she snarled at Marissa.

"Hi!" Marissa said happily.

"Would you like me to help her to the door, Brynne?"

"Why would I want that?" I asked.

"Because she ignored you for a week, maybe? I don't know."

"That was just a misunderstanding." I explained.

"And I apologized." Marissa added.

"Oh." Celeste said. A frown covered her whole face and her shoulders slumped. "I just thought we," she looked at the floor. "I mean you..." She glanced up at me. "I mean after Saturday night..."

"What happened Saturday night?" Marissa asked.

"Nothing." I told her.

"No," Celeste said. She raised her head and stomped toward her room.

"Nothing happened *at all*!"

Has everyone in my life gone completely insane? I mean what was that about? She's mad at me because I have a girlfriend? Well tough luck, Celeste, you didn't want the position when you were offered it. Good grief, she doesn't want me and she doesn't want me to be with anyone else. How stupid.

"Anyway, let's go do something." Marissa said. "Want to go to the mall?"

“Um, we need to talk about...”

“About us? I know I screwed up. I *said* I did! I don't know why you keep coming back to it. I mean really, Brynne, are you always going to be like this? Trying to make me feel bad and remind me of every little thing that goes wrong? 'Cause if so then maybe we...”

“No!” I guess I shouldn't have brought it up again. “Let's go to the mall, you're right.”

“There's a new store opening where the Sears used to be. We should check it out.”

“Sure, sounds like fun.” I said. I have no idea where the Sears used to be.

Okay, shopping is always fun. I mean hey, what girl doesn't like to shop? But the really nice part was just walking around holding Marissa's hand all day. I just feel like it's right. Maybe she's not going to be as special to me as Teresa was, but I feel some kind of connection. There's something there, some... I don't know, unseen force. It's nice.

That evening, after Marissa had given me a nice goodbye hug and went home, Jess and I went out searching for our vampire. It seems like such a waste of our time, though. Even Marissa thinks so.

“What about Celeste?” Jess asked me.

“Hm?”

We hadn't been talking for a while, so she tossed this at me out of nowhere. Was there something she is referring to that I just can't think of?

“You kissed her.” she reminded me.

“That was, um, a mistake.” Clearly.

“Brynne, you *like* her.” she pointed out. “And she likes you.”

“I have a girlfriend.”

“Who you just started seeing and who didn't call for like a week! Come on! Dump the bitch and...”

I swung my hand to slap her but stopped myself just before making contact. I can't believe I almost did that! The look on her face tells me she can't believe it either.

“I...” I cover my mouth with my hand. “I'm sorry. But you shouldn't talk about Marissa like that.”

“Wow.” She said. “Really Brynne? What is going on with you?”

“Nothing is going on with *me*!” I shouted. “You're the one who is acting like a jerk.”

“Whatever. I don't even want to be around you right now.” She said, stomping away.

Well Jess, the feeling is mutual! She has been a pain in the neck since I met Marissa. I don't know what she has against her. I mean she even set us up!

It's okay, they just don't understand how I feel. I don't even understand how I feel. Sometimes even I doubt it, so I know can't understand yet. But it's so different now.

I walked around for another hour before heading toward the apartment. It was really depressing being alone, and I was busy thinking about how I can stay friends with someone when they hate my girlfriend so much.

“Hey,” I heard a male voice say. “Aren't you a little young to be out by yourself so late?”

“Uh,” I swiveled and there was nobody there.

“Over here.” he said from behind me. But when I turned he wasn't there, either. “Or right here.” he said into my ear.

This time when I turned he was there. Six-six dark complexion, thin frame, and glowing red eyes.

“What *are* you?” I mumbled. My heart was racing.

“Asks the vampire.” he said, laughing.

“I'm not a...”

“Your friend said to tell you she'll make sure Jenna gets the same treatment you do.” he said.

The next thing I know I'm on the ground, facing up at this monster. My chest hurt where he had hit me, and my eyes were filling with tears. He was growing. Like... not taller, just way more muscular. I'm not sure what he is. How is this possible?

I rolled away from him, scrambling to my feet, but he was there in front of me again and took a swing at me, sending me hurling into a tree, and breaking my left arm in the process.

Then there was a blade. A very *big* blade. Why does everyone try to slice and dice me?

I tried to run, but he caught me and sliced down my back. And then

he was on top of me. I got a couple of good shots in with my right arm, and managed to knee him in the groin, but he didn't even slow down. He swatted at me, clawing at my face and body, shredding my skin almost all the way to the bone in several places.

I saw Jess. Then the creature bit me and I passed out.

Wednesday, June 4

I woke up in my bed at the apartment. Marissa was sitting next to me, Jess and Celeste were standing at the foot of the bed.

“How are you feeling, honey?” Jess asked. She squeezed my foot gently.

“What happened?” I asked. Ugh, my throat hurts.

“You were attacked by something.” A man said. I turned and saw that he was sitting on Jessica's bed. “We're not sure what yet.”

“What was it, Brynne?” Jess asked.

“You saw it.” I mumbled. “It was hideous, it...”

“I didn't see it at all.” she said. “I shouldn't have left you alone. I'm so sorry, honey.”

“It was... you had to have seen it when you saved me.”

“Brynne, I found you alone and bleeding just before sunrise. A few more minutes and it would have been really bad.”

“Being attacked by that... that furry, gross thing wasn't bad?” I asked. “And it bit me after I saw you, it was way before sunrise.”

“I think you're confused.” she said.

“What did it look like?” Marissa asked.

“Um...” I focused on her. “I... I mean... if I were going to say what it looked like, I'd say kind of like a really gross and mean version of a... um... I mean...” I looked over at Celeste. “A werewolf.”

“Not likely.” she said. “They don't exist.”

“Kind of like vampires?” Marissa asked.

“Hey, non-vampires, if you please.” Jess told her, bringing up what has become sort of a running gag at this point. Maybe I shouldn't be so

sensitive about being called a vampire, I don't know.

"Can you describe the attack?" the man asked.

"Who is this?" I asked Celeste.

"Buddy. He's from the agency."

Buddy? I'm seriously supposed to give a detailed account to someone named *Buddy*? Sounds all professional and all, doesn't it?

"He took me by surprise. And he was fast! He'd say something, and by the time I turned toward him he would be in a different place."

"Interesting." was Buddy's comment.

"And then he hit and slashed and broke my arm, cut me deep and... um..." I must look a mess. My face is probably still shredded. I'm probably hideous. I hope I heal okay. "And he said my friend, um," I focused in on Jessica. "My friend said to tell me she'd give Jenna the same treatment I was getting."

Jess didn't flinch, and she didn't seem surprised. That is so weird. What friend would want me hurt like that? And who all...

"Who is Jenna?" the man asked. I didn't answer, I just kept looking at Jess.

"Her favorite doll." Jess told him.

"Ah,"

There were more questions and answers, but none seemed important. My friend said the same thing would happen to my favorite doll. There are only a handful of people who know how much that doll means to me. And I saw Jess there way before she claims to have been there.

Okay, wait, there is no way Jessica had anything to do with this. That is a ludicrous thought! Laughable, even. Someone just happened to know. Maybe they were spying on us or something.

“You need your rest.” Jess told me. “Time to go, Marissa.”

“But I want to stay with...”

“We are not having this conversation today.” Jess stated.

“It's okay,” I told Marissa. “I'm just going to go to sleep anyway.”

And I did. And I think I woke about fifteen times from nightmares about being attacked by that thing. And in most of them Jessica was there, watching it all go on and doing nothing to stop him.

Saturday June 7

“More blood?” Jess asked.

“Have you had any yet?”

“No, but I'm not really hungry.” she said. She sat on the edge of my bed. “Besides, you really need it so you can get better.”

“I'm feeling pretty good now.” I told her.

“You're still weak.”

“I'm like maybe ninety percent, though. I'm good. Go ahead and drink it.”

“That's okay, I'll just put it in the refrigerator for you for later.”

I got out of bed against Jessica's protests and I showered and dressed. I'm sick of laying in bed, and we need to catch whatever that thing was. Even if the idea of coming face to face with that again scares the living poo out of me.

“So, uh,” I said, getting Celeste's attention at the kitchen table. “Any word from anyone with the VI about how we can defeat these werewolf thingies?”

“Brynne,” she said, sighing and laying her iPad aside. “Werewolves do not exist. I've told you this a hundred...”

“Well whatever it was then.”

“No. Nobody has ever heard of anything remotely like what you described.”

“So maybe werewolves *do* exist and they've just never heard of them.” I pointed out.

“Doubtful.” she snapped. She glared at me. “Whatever you think you saw,”

"Think!?" I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay, well, you may think I'm crazy,"

"I don't think you're..."

"Whatever. I know what I saw, and you aren't going to convince me otherwise."

"Fine."

I sat down and played a game on my phone while I calmed down. I guess it is good to have a phone. I never really needed one before, but I never really thought of using it for games and for reading. I have all my favorite books right in my hands. Why didn't I have one of these things years ago?

"Any news on Roderick?" I asked.

"They still haven't taken him down. They know where he's at, and they're keeping an eye on him, but they are waiting to have more agents in place before they make a move. Just in case."

"So they just let him keep killing?" And how many agents do they need in order to kill him?

"He hasn't killed any more children recently." she said.

"Well that's good."

"Definitely."

I hope they don't mess this up. Plus, he could be wiping out whole villages and they just not know. He might be sneaking past them or something. He has to know they are following him.

"I'm thinking of going out to hunt for the vampires tonight." I said.

"You sure you're up to it?"

“Yeah, I feel pretty good.”

“Brynn, why don't you just give it one more night before you do that?” she said with concern. “Please.”

“I just want this over.”

“Couldn't you spend the night doing something around here so you can regain your strength a little more?” she asked.

“I don't really have anything to do. Just sitting here is killing me.”

“Maybe you could go do something with Marissa.” she said. It kind of looks like it hurt to say. She hates Marissa so much.

“She's busy tonight with her sister.”

“Oh.” She picked up her iPad and stared at the screen. “Well maybe we could go to a movie, then?”

“You don't have to babysit me.”

“There's a foreign film I really want to see, but I hate going alone. I mean... ya know, if you can stand to read the subtitles, then I'd like you to come along.”

“Um...” Her and Jess really aren't going to let me go out hunting anyway, I guess. Not without a fight. “I guess.”

“Good. You can go out and do your thing tomorrow night.”

I invited Jess along, but she wanted to stay home for the evening. Celeste and I ate at Hardees before going to the theater. The movie was all in French, and there were several times where the subtitles flashed by so quickly that I missed what was said. Everything was dreary and gloomy and it was very depressing.

“That was such a romantic movie.” Celeste said as we walked from the theater.

“Eh,” I said. I cannot believe she liked that so much.

“That one girl reminded me so much of Marissa.” she said, laughing.

“Sorry.”

“The backstabbing girl who betrayed her best friend?” I asked. “Wow, nice of you to compare her to my girlfriend.”

“Sorry.” she repeated. She grabbed my arm and turned me toward her. “No, I'm not sorry. Brynne, why are you with her? She's a jerk.”

“I like her.”

“But she's the complete opposite of you! You're sweet and you care about people, and she's a rude jerk who cares about nobody but herself.”

“Hey!”

“Well I'm sorry, but it's true.”

“You just don't know her.” I said.

“Are you so blinded by her act that you can't see how fake she is?”

“She's not, she's...”

“She is!” Celeste insisted.

“It isn't your business.”

“What if I want to make it my business?” she asked. She backed away from me. “What if I just needed some time to think, that I just wasn't quite ready before?”

Before when she said I was a child? When she rejected me? When she pushed me away when I kissed her?

“I'm with Marissa now.” I mumbled.

I headed up the street, not waiting for Celeste. But, sadly, she was my ride home and I wasn't ready to walk the distance alone. Not with that thing out there. So I had to wait for her to unlock the car and drive me home.

“So, um, now I'm not just a kid?” I asked. This is embarrassing. “Now you're interested?”

“You were never just a kid to me, Brynne.”

“But now you're interested?”

“It really doesn't matter, does it?” she asked. “You're with Marissa.”

“But if I wasn't?”

“I've always thought you were an interesting girl.”

“So if I weren't with Marissa?”

“I don't know. I really don't.”

Great. I like Marissa. I don't love Marissa. I will probably never love Marissa. Not really. I don't love Celeste, either, but at least with her there is still that outside chance that one day I could. But I can't just dump my girlfriend to find out. Especially when she makes me feel so special when we're together.

“Oh look, it's Satan herself.” Celeste said.

“Huh?” I followed her eyes to see Marissa sitting on the step outside our apartment. “Oh.”

We parked and made our way up to where Marissa was seated. She gave me a hug, and managed a nice hello to Celeste. Celeste ignored her and went inside.

“Jess didn't let you in?” I asked.

“She isn't here.”

“What?” I turned to look for her car and didn't see it. “Weird. She was going to stay home all evening.”

"I don't know, but Miranda and I have been sitting here for almost two hours,. She had to leave just a couple of minutes ago so she can get to bed, she has work tomorrow. So can we go inside? I really have to pee."

"Well why didn't you call or text when nobody was here?"

"I sent a text." she said. "Maybe your phone was off while you were in the movie?"

"Oh, right."

As we made our way inside I pulled my phone out. Sure enough, there was a text from Marissa saying she'd be over in a couple of minutes. Hm. She's right, I must have gotten the text while I had my phone silenced while we were in the theater. I don't even remember mentioning that we were at the movies, though.

"There was another body found in Lenexa." Celeste told me.
"Vampire."

"Why can't we catch these people!"

"We'll keep trying." she assured me. "Where is Jessica? Did she tell Marissa?"

"No. Maybe she went out looking for the vampires or that werewolf or whatever by herself."

"She's smarter than that."

"I thought she was, but lately I just don't know."

I tried calling Jessica, but she didn't answer. We waited in front of the television for over an hour before I heard her pull in. We all met her at her car.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"I've been out with Miranda all night." she replied.

"Miranda is at home." Marissa said. "She was here with me for almost two hours before Brynne got here."

"She was with me, you can ask her yourself." Jess said, glaring at Marissa.

"It's not important right now." Celeste said, cutting off the argument. "There was another body found in Lenexa a couple of hours ago."

"Dammit." Jess said. "Please tell me it wasn't another young one?"

"Twelve." Celeste said.

"Ugh!"

Twelve is way too young to die. That's not enough time to have even experienced life. That is not old enough to even leave the house alone these days.

"Oh that is low." Marissa said, disgust filling her voice. "Who could hurt a child like that? You would have to be the most disgusting creature on the face of the planet."

"At least we can agree on that." Jess said.

"Are we sure your ex boyfriend isn't around again?" Marissa asked.

"He wasn't my boyfriend, and he isn't around."

"It was a vampire, anyway." Celeste said.

She looked around, just now realizing we were still in public I think. This would probably be a bad time to have all the neighbors thing we're a bunch of weird vampire loving cult members or something.

"We should have this conversation inside."

"Yeah," Jess said. She grabbed her bag from the car and slammed the door.

“Hey, what's that?” Marissa asked, pointing at the bag.

“What, you've never seen a bag before?”

“No, dumbass, I meant the stuff on the side.” she reached out and touched it and held her finger up. “Eww. Is this what I think it is?” she asked, holding her hand out toward me.

“Blood.” I said, recognizing the odor immediately. “Did you take some with you?” I asked Jess.

“No, I have no idea where that came from.”

“Yuck, it's on your seats.” Marissa said, pointing into the car. “Aren't you supposed to be able to smell that, or something? I mean being cooped up in a car I'd think...”

“Miranda had on strong perfume, so maybe...”

“Miranda was with me all night!” Marissa said. “Brynne, I'm telling you the truth. We can call her!”

“Look,” Jess grabbed Marissa's arm. “I've had about enough of your bullsh...”

“You're hurting me!”

“Hey, stop!” I said.

Why can't these two get along for just five minutes? Is that too much to ask?

I grabbed Jessica's arm.

“Come on, don't do this.” I said.

“Where did the blood come from, Jessica?” Celeste asked, looking down into the car. “If you didn't spill some of what we gave you, where did you get it?”

“I didn't!” she replied. “I have no idea where that came from!”

“Likely story.” Marissa said, stepping behind me.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jess asked her.

“Well,” she shrugged. “Another body was found and you have blood everywhere. You figure it out.”

“Oh right, now you're accusing me?”

“I didn't accuse anyone of anything.”

“Brynne, let me snap this little twerp's neck. Please.”

“No snapping of anything.” Celeste said. “It's a valid point, though.”

“Oh you can't think that I'd... But I mean... Celeste! Oh come on.”

“I don't know you that well. And you were nowhere to be seen all evening.”

“Brynne?”

“I... I mean...”

Could she have killed the girl? I don't think so. The Jessica I know would never do that.

“I believe you.” I told her. “I know you couldn't do that.”

“Why is she lying then, Brynne?” Marissa asked.

“Look you little bitch,” Jess said, reaching for her. “I'm going to...”

“Call Miranda, she'll tell you they weren't together.” Marissa told me.

If I call it will be like telling Jess I don't trust her. I do. But... I mean she was there when I was attacked, and claims she wasn't. She claims she didn't see that hideous thing, and she had to have seen it when she was no more than ten feet from it and it was attacking me. And now blood.

“What's the number?” I asked.

“Brynne!” Jess gasped.

“Sorry Jess, I just need to get this straight before it drives me nuts, okay?”

“Fine, ask her.”

“I trust you, I just... I need to know the truth.”

“And you believe this bitch over me?”

“I didn't say...”

“Here,” Marissa said, holding out the phone.

“Hello,” I said into it, pulling it away from Marissa. “Miranda?”

“Marissa said you needed to talk to me?” Miranda said, yawning. “I hope it's important, I was just about to fall asleep. I have work in the morning.”

“Yeah, uh... were you out with Jessica earlier?”

“Earlier? Today? No. Why?”

“What?!” Jess snapped. “Give me that phone, I...”

“You weren't?” I asked.

“No, I spent all day with Marissa. What's this about?”

“Are you sure?” I asked, eying my best friend as she glared in anger at the phone. “You mean you and Marissa maybe didn't spend time with her, or you go with her when you two came over here, or anything?”

“We sat on your step for a couple of hours waiting for you, then I came home to get ready for bed. Now can I *please* go to sleep, Brynne? I am dead tired.”

“Um, yeah, uh... thanks.”

I ended the call and watched as Jessica fumed and stomped back and forth. She kept looking at Marissa with a passionate hatred I've never

really seen from Jess before.

“Lying little whore.” Jessica mumbled. “Bitch.”

“Jess,” I said.

“Good for nothing asshole.”

“Why, um...” I can't believe I'm saying this. “Why did you lie to me, Jess?”

“I'm not!” She shouted at me.

“I...” I felt tears beginning. “You didn't attack anyone, did you?”

“I've never done anything like that. Ever!”

“You said she wasn't hungry earlier.” Marissa said. “Maybe that's because she's been dining out. On twelve year olds!”

“Jess,” Did I say Jess wasn't hungry? “You... I mean...”

“Brynne, you know me! You know I could never do that!”

“Why is she lying about the blood, then?” Marissa asked.

“Let's go in the house and discuss this.” Celeste told us.

“There's really no point, is there?” Jess asked her. “You've all made up your minds.” She pulled her keys out and stepped to her car.

“Dammit! I thought...” she sniffled. “I thought at least you would know I couldn't do something like that, Brynne.”

She got in her car and drove off as we all watched.

“Did that really just happen?” I asked. I wiped at my face.

“She's a killer then?” Marissa asked me. “She isn't going to go attack Miranda, is she? I better call her, she needs to be ready to protect herself. Brynne, you have to go over there to stop Jessica from attacking my sister!”

“She wouldn't do that.” I said.

“You didn't think she'd do this, either!”

“It would be too obvious who did it, Marissa.” Celeste told her. “She wouldn't be stupid enough for that.”

“Jess isn't a killer.” I mumbled.

“Brynne, it seems pretty obvious that she is.” Marissa said, hugging me. “I'm sorry.”

“I... I have to call this in to the VI, Brynne.” Celeste informed me. “I'm sorry.”

Celeste went inside to talk to her superiors at the VI. And after just a few minutes, Marissa and I also went in. We sat on the sofa and I was too stunned to even cry. How could Jess do anything like that?

“I'm sorry.” Marissa said. She leaned over and pulled me into a hug. “I know you don't want to believe it, but Jess has just... turned evil, or something, Brynne!”

“There has to be another explanation.” I said.

“Okay. Well, let's just look at the evidence and see if we can figure it out.” she said.

And we did. We spent the next hour, me her and Celeste, talking about everything we knew. And at the end I came the conclusion that... that Jess was a killer.

“And she was there when you were attacked.” Marissa told me.

“Why would Jess want to hurt me? She would never.”

“To cover things up, maybe? I don't know.”

“I have to find her,” I said, rising to my feet. “I have to give her a

chance to explain, or... or apologize and promise she won't..."

"No!" Marissa said, grabbing my arm. "Please. She could kill you, Brynne!"

"No, she would never..."

"Are you sure?" Celeste asked. "Whatever happened when you were attacked, you could have died. If she did that, she could do it again."

Sunday June 8

I woke from my fitful sleep to the sound of the phone ringing. I glanced at the number and ignored the call. But then they called back again.

“Hi.” I said.

“Brynne, what is going on?” Peggy asked. She sounded really upset. Which is understandable.

“I don't even know.” I told her, my voice cracking. “Jess just... I guess she called you.”

“Yes, she did. I'm very disappointed, Brynne.”

“Me too. I'm sure she had a reason, or... she just couldn't control herself, or something. I should have kept a better eye on her, she's still new at being like this, I just...”

“I'm disappointed in *you*.” she clarified.

“Oh.”

“How could you even believe she would do such a thing!?”

“Peggy, there's just... there's a lot of evidence, and...”

“You know better! We took you in, we saved you, knowing what you are and the things you've done in the past, we still did it.”

“I...”

“Jessica would do anything for you.”

“I know.”

“This is how you repay her?”

“Peggy, I just... I just... I have to go.”

I have no idea what to think anymore. Jess couldn't have done that. She wouldn't. I know this. I know it more than I know anything.

Jessica is just not capable of doing those horrible things.

“Brynne,” I heard Marissa say. She knocked lightly on my door.

“Hey,” I said.

She came into my room. She went home for what, about four hours? The girl must need sleep, yet she's here with me.

“Heard from Jessica yet?” she asked.

“No. But I did hear from Peggy.”

“And who is Peggy?” Marissa asked.

“Jessica's mother.”

“Oh, right.” she said, nodding. “Where are you guys from, anyway?”

“Hanton.”

“Interesting.” she said, nodding. “Where is that? I've never heard of it.”

“South of here about two hours.”

“Cool.” She smiled again and shook her head. “Anyway, we should go get something to eat.”

“I don't feel very hungry.”

“Because of Jess?”

“It's just... there's no way she could do that stuff. I need to find her.”

“The evidence was pretty strong.” she said.

She went back through the blood, and the fact that I saw Jess there when I was attacked, and the timing of everything. She's right, Jess had to be the one who killed that kid.

"It's my fault." I said.

"No, Brynne," she hugged me. "She's the monster."

"I made her like that, though."

"You didn't make her kill that little girl."

The front door opened and closed. Celeste. She stomped in toward us, sighing multiple times. She sucked in a breath when she saw us. I don't think she likes Marissa hugging me.

"Bad news." Celeste said to us.

"What now?" Marissa asked, pulling away from me. "Jess kill someone else now?"

"No. At least not that I'm aware of. But Brynne," she put her hand on my arm. "The blood on Jess's car matches the dead girl."

Well that settles that, I guess. Jess is a killer. I never would have thought that. I never would have believed it.

"I'm sorry." Marissa said.

"Yeah." I mumbled.

I went into the bathroom so I could be alone for a few minutes. I needed time to digest the fact that my best friend ever, the one person in the world I would kill for or die for, was a murderer.

After a half an hour Marissa tapped on the door. I wiped at my face and opened up. She didn't even look upset. My world was crashing down and she wasn't even upset. Of course it wasn't her best friend that killed a child. Or multiple children.

“Ready to go get something to eat?” she asked.

“What?” Wow, talk about insensitive. “Uh, no.”

“Well what do you want to do then?”

“I really want to find Jess. I need to talk to her.”

“What for? She's a killer, Brynne.”

“She's my best friend.”

“Great,” she said. *Now* she gets upset? “My girlfriend would rather spend time with a child killer than with me. Super.”

“Marissa,”

“No, you just go. Maybe you two can, I don't know, take down a kindergarten class together or something.”

“Marissa,”

“No, whatever. I'm leaving. I'll talk to you later.”

I followed her to the door and watched as she walked away. Is everyone nuts lately, or just me? I just don't understand.

“What do you see in her?” Celeste asked.

“Um... she's pretty, for one.”

“That's it? That's really shallow.”

“Well,”

“Can she carry on an intelligent conversation with you, or challenge you, or even understand anything about you?”

“I don't... know.”

“That's really sad.”

“What, and you can?” I asked.

“Puh!” she said. She turned away. “This isn't about me.”

“She... she makes me feel good.”

“Because a pretty girl likes you?” she said, still not looking at me.

“No. I mean yes, but... there's something else. When I'm with her I just feel better. Or something.” It's confusing.

“You are different when she is here. Do you know that? And not in a good way.”

“Look, I understand you don't like her, but...”

“It's not that,” she said. She sighed and turned toward me. “Not *just* that. I know you, I have read all the intel the VI have on you, I've done research myself, and from the times we've spent together, and something is just... *off* when you are with her.”

“Celeste,”

“Look, I'm just...”

“Jealous?” I asked.

I was just trying to annoy her, but I think I really hit the mark. It was also unfair. I don't think that is what she is talking about.

“Worried.” she said.

“I know.”

She sighed and went into the kitchen. I never liked the smell of coffee, but it didn't bother me today. Today it was a welcome distraction from the fruity scent of Celeste's shampoo. Why is the world full of hot women I can't have?

"I'm going out to look for Jess." I told her.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Well she won't answer my phone, so I have to do something."

"Just wait. It's not safe out there."

"Which is exactly why I need to be out there finding her!"

"Brynnne,"

"I'm going!"

I walked for hours, stopping every few minutes to call Jess in vain hopes that she would pick up the phone. Celeste called twice to try to get me to come home, but I just couldn't. I had to find Jess.

And then I did.

It was late, maybe near midnight, and I came across a park just down from a school. Most of the lights were out, keeping anyone who wasn't very near-- or at least any *human* who wasn't near-- from seeing what was going on. She had a young boy, probably around eight, held down and was gnawing into his neck.

"Jess, no," I said, hurrying toward her.

She looked up at me and gave me a glare that I never imagined from her. It was like she bottled up centuries of hatred inside and let it all out at me in one look.

"Stop!" I shouted.

She flung the boy halfway across the park and raised to a sort of attack stance, waiting for me to near. And she growled. I swear she did.

“Bitch.” she said.

And then she was the werewolf thing from the other night.

It was only a flicker... and then she was Jessica again, but it was enough to stop me in my tracks.

“What's she doing here?” I heard. It sounded like Miranda, but I didn't dare turn to see.

The werewolf/Jess thing came toward me, smiling with Jessica's face, but I still wasn't sure this was Jess.

“The boy is already dead.” Jess said. Then a flicker and she was the monster again, then back to Jess. “Just run home and tell your vampire hunter pal that I killed another one.” she said, laughing. “Go on!”

“I'm not going anywhere.” I told her. “Not without you. Not until you explain. Come on Jess, just tell me what is going on. I feel like I'm going insane.”

“You're such a disappointment.” she said.

“Me? You're the one killing children.”

“And you don't even try to stop me. Pathetic.” she said. She got nearer to me and I reflexively backed away. “At first I thought if I just brought you along slowly you'd eventually get the instinct, but you just never would realize that we're the superior race, that *we're* the ones who are the top of the food chain!”

“Uh, Jess, I... I...”

"This works pretty good." she said to some weird girl with double pigtails who just seemed to show up out of nowhere. "At least on her." She turned to look at me again. "Though she always was weak minded."

And then she attacked me. I tried to run away, but I couldn't. She was too fast. She pulled me down from behind and clawed at me with claws that were most definitely not Jessica's hands.

"I never should have let you live!" she shouted at me.

"Let me go!"

She flipped me over and punched at me, and bit me, and twisted my hand back so far that my fingers all broke. I writhed in pain and she laughed at me.

And then it was a male voice laughing. For only an instant, but it was. A familiar one.

I knew I had to get out of there, that I must be going nutty from the pain, and I tried to slide away from... the monster now. It was back. And then Jess. And then I saw a knife.

"Hurry up," The girl who had appeared from nowhere told him. It? Her? "I'm losing her."

"Just a little longer." Jess told her, laughing. "I'm having fun."

"I didn't get a chance to feed!" the girl insisted.

There was a flicker again when I looked over at her and I could have sworn I saw Marissa. And then it was the weird girl with the double

pigtails again.

“You said you didn't want her dead yet.” she told Jess.

“She's barely hurt. She comes from a tough family, believe me.”

And then she was punching me and beating on me, slicing into me with the knife, breaking bones... and there was nothing I could do to stop it. She was way more powerful than me. Way more powerful than I ever gave her credit for.

And then she was gone.

I laid there, trying to get the strength to crawl away, trying not to pass out from the pain, and I couldn't move. I was barely able to breathe.

Was Jess the shape shifting monster thing? Was this somehow tied to the attack by Roderick? Maybe whatever he is, the striga or whatever, causes this kind of... mutation to our kind when they attack them?

“Brynne,” Jess said.

“Please...” I mumbled. “Please Jess, no more.”

“Oh my god!”

“Just kill me now, okay?” I whispered.

“Oh honey!”

She scooped me into her arms and ran to her car, placing me in the passenger side. She was behind the wheel and speeding off before I could blink.

“Who did this to you?” she asked me.

“You... did.”

“No. You're delirious. Don't try to talk now, we'll figure it out later.”

“Where are you... ta... taking... me?” I asked.

“We need help. Celeste will be able to get some blood for you, and...”

“Jess?”

“Brynne, just hang in there.”

“Are you a werewolf?”

“No, honey, I'm not.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She hurried me inside at the apartment and through the night she and Celeste fixed me up the best they could. Enough that I was able to sleep after a while.

Monday, June 9

"M... morning." I whispered. I wiped at my eyes with hands that hurt a lot.

"How are you feeling, honey?" Jess asked. She smoothed my hair back. "You gave me quite a scare."

"I'm okay." I said. "Jess, um... you... you attacked me last night."

"No, I didn't, I..."

"I saw you. I heard you. You were telling me I'm a disappointment, and..."

"It wasn't me, Brynne." she said. "Whoever attacked you, it wasn't..."

"But I know it was you!"

"No,"

"And... but it was the monster thing too."

"Just try to relax." she told me.

"I'm so confused, Jess."

"I know."

"You killed that boy."

"I would never do something like that," she said, shaking her head as tears rolled down her face. "You know I wouldn't."

"I don't know what I know anymore."

"That's great. Ya know, I'm sick of you not believing me."

"Jess, it's just... there's so much evidence, and..."

"Yeah, well, *I didn't do it!*"

I don't understand this at all. Jess wouldn't do something like that. She just wouldn't. Except everything makes it look like she did. Is she doing these horrible things without knowing it?

"Maybe you kind of black out and don't realize what you're doing?" I suggested to her.

"Brynne! This is... ya know, what? I'm going to prove who did this. I... whoever is just... I'm being framed."

"Framed by who?"

"The real killers. Last night I..."

"When you were attacking me?" I asked.

"I didn't attack you!" she insisted. "I thought I found something. I overheard some stuff at an apartment complex north of here, over on Quivira. I'm going to check it out. I think they are the ones who are doing all the killing around here."

"They? H-how many?"

"I don't know. At least two."

"Okay. Prove it, Jess. Please."

"I'll try. I better go. I'm sure Celeste has called the VI on me by now. Or they probably have this place bugged. And since everyone seems convinced I'm a horrible killer, I'm sure the VI would like to just execute me on the spot, just to be sure."

She gave me a kind of half hug, as best she could with me laying down, and then headed toward the door. She looks so hurt that I don't believe her. But how can I?

This is Jessica Sloan here. The best person I have ever known. How can I *not* trust her?

Still...

“Be careful, Jess.” I said.

“I will. And I'll prove to you that I'm not a killer.” she said, her back still to me.

“I... believe you.”

“You do?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“I want to.” I whispered.

“Well, at least that's something.”

She was gone then. I stared at the spot she had been standing, wondering again if there was any way Jess could do what everyone seems convinced she did. She's going to find those vampires and prove she wasn't the killer. I know she will. And then this will all be over.

“Be safe, Jess.” I whispered again. “I love you.”

It couldn't have been two minutes later that Marissa arrived. She mumbled a hello to Celeste in the living room, then she was at my side, grabbing onto my hand.

“How are you doing this morning?” she asked.

“I'll be okay in a day or two.”

“I guess he really tore you up last night, huh?”

“Um... he?”

“It was the creature that attacked you the other night, wasn't it?” she asked.

“Um... yeah, it was.”

“Good.” She smiled and patted my hand. “You were kind of out of it when you called me this morning, but that's what you said.”

“When I called? I... I didn't, I just now woke up, I...”

“Oh.” she patted my hand and leaned close to my face. “You *did* call, Brynne.” She smiled wide. “You called and told me all about it.”

“No, there's no way, I couldn't...”

“You called and told me all about it.” she repeated.

“Um... oh. Yeah, of course.”

I really am out of it, I guess. I don't really remember calling, but... I mean it's kind of hazy, anyway. Weird. I mean how could I have forgotten the whole conversation like that? Weird.

“I'm just sorry Jessica was there, too.” Celeste said.

“Jess... she... oh yeah, I told you that, didn't I?”

“Yeah.”

“You just missed her.” I said. “She brought me here and she stayed to make sure I was okay.”

“She's just trying to confuse you, Brynne.” She patted my hand again. “She attacks you and then tries to take care of you.”

“She's not like that. I don't know what is going on, but I don't think Jess did any of those things.”

“No, no, she really is a killer. You know she is!”

“I... um...” Ugh! My head hurts so much! “No, Jess isn't evil like that!”

“Oh Brynne, honey, you just told me on the phone earlier that you knew she was. Now she has you convinced she isn't? No. She *is* an evil monster.”

“Yeah, um... I... know.” Do I? Yes.

“It's terrible she's out there killing others. I may know some people who could take care of her, Brynne. If you want.”

“Um... no, I...” Ugh. I feel dizzy. Like last night. “I mean she said... I know... I can't let her keep killing.” I squinted my eyes together and shook my head. “I... I think maybe if I call the VI and tell them where she was going... maybe they'll... if I tell them what she's planning...”

“She's planning to kill more?” Celeste asked.

“Um... no, she... just wants to prove she isn't...”

“By killing some innocent human and blaming everything on them.” Marissa accused. “That's it, isn't it?”

“No, it's...”

“Then why did you just tell me that not more than two minutes ago?”

“Oh... right. I... I better call the VI and have them get her.”

“That's a good idea.”

I can't believe I just let her escape like that. She's out killing those innocent people and I can't do anything about it because I'm laid up in bed. Argh!

I had Marissa hand me my phone, then asked her to wait in the living room while I talked to Paolo.

“She said she was headed to an apartment complex north on Quivira. That's all I know.” I told him, after explaining that I was sure she was the killer now, and I thought it was best they take her out.

“I'll tell them to make it as quick and painless as possible.” he said. “I know how hard this is for you. I'm very sorry, Miss Brynne.”

“It's so hard.” I squeaked. “Let me know when it's done?”

“I will.”

I feel like I just betrayed the only true friend I've ever had. But if she

did all those things... she wouldn't do those things... she obviously killed all those people... I... No, she is a killer. I know it.

“Done?” Marissa asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Don't be so down, you probably just saved a lot of lives.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Look, I gotta run. I gotta... um, help someone move.” she told me.

“You have to help them move when I'm laying here half dead?”

“Yeah, well, it just came up, they are... being kicked out of their apartment now.”

“Oh. Who?”

“Just some friends of mine. I better go before it's too late.”

“Oh. Yeah. Bye.”

“Bye.”

When she was gone I stared down at the phone, the tool that I used to kill my best friend. Except if she's a child murderer... No! No! Jess wouldn't do that! I know it!

Ugh!

It's done anyway. No use worrying about it. I can't save her now, even if I wanted to.

I looked through my phone, curious what time it was that I called Marissa this morning to tell her about everything. I couldn't find any dialed calls from my phone. Did I use someone else's phone? Weird.

It may have been two hours later, or it may have been two centuries. All I know is Celeste was sitting by my side on the bed, stroking my hair, talking softly as she tried to get me to stop crying.

“You didn't have a choice.” she told me.

“There's always a choice!”

“If she was a killer...”

“She wasn't!” I shouted.

“You were so adamant before, Brynne, and now...”

“Well I was wrong! I don't know what I was thinking... Jess... she'd never do that, and...”

“Brynne,”

“She would never!”

“Well then I'm sorry.” Celeste said. “I'm sorry about this whole situation. I should have never kept you here. It was my idea to step in, I thought I could handle this assignment and it just hasn't worked.”

“Without Jess here there is nothing keeping me.” I told her. “I... may go as soon as I'm better.”

“What about Marissa?”

“Is she here? If she cared about me she'd be here, wouldn't she? Instead of helping someone move.”

“What about me?” she asked.

“Celeste... I... what about you?”

“I thought we had something.”

“It's not like we're dating.” I reminded her.

“Well we're something.” she said, kind of defensively. “At least.”

“Celeste, I don't understand why you'd...”

The phone rang. I grabbed at it, angry that I hadn't broken the thing yet. If I hadn't had that thing then Jess would still be alive.

Except it was Jessica's number on the screen.

“Jess!” I shouted into the phone.

“I can't believe what just happened.” she said. She sounded out of breath. “A bunch of VI guys showed up and...”

“I'm so sorry, Jess!” I sobbed.

“Sorry? No, Brynne, they attacked me. I barely got away.”

“I know. I... called them and told them where you were.”

“You...” She was quiet for a long time. “That's effed up, Brynne.”

“Jess...”

She hung up.

Well, at least she's still alive. That's wonderful! Even if she hates me now, it's wonderful!

Tuesday, June 10

I was feeling a little better when I woke. Celeste arranged for extra blood, which helped. But I was still really down about Jessica. I mean I'm happy she's alive, but I feel awful that I almost got her killed.

"Will they still be after her?" I asked Celeste.

"The Venator Inmortuorum?" she asked. "They think she's a monster who kills children. Of course they will."

"Can you call them off?"

"Brynne," she said. She put the pan down and sat across from me, giving me that look that parents give children when they are trying to break it to them gently that the puppy died. "There's a lot of evidence."

"I know, but I *know* Jess wouldn't do any of that."

"And just yesterday you were certain she did it." she reminded me.

"I know, but..."

"You just need to stop worrying about Jessica and start worrying about yourself."

"What does that mean? What, are they coming for me next?"

"No, but you were attacked by something, and you need to recover."

"While Jess is out there running from the VI?"

"Yes! You're not going to be able to help her in your condition. And if you are so sure she is innocent then when you are well enough you can help us find the real assailant."

"I..." That makes sense. "Okay." I said, nodding. "But promise me that you, at least, won't do anything to hurt Jess or help them find her."

"I have a duty..."

“Look, if we’re... friends, or whatever, then do that for me. Please.”

“Okay.” she said, sighing.

I always hate just sitting around when things are going on like this. Or at all, really. I’m the kind of person that has to be doing something. Even if it’s just setting up a little tea party for Jenna and her friends.

“Jess isn’t a killer.” I told Jenna. “Right?”

Of course one of the problems of having a friend that is a doll is that they never talk back. I wish she could. I wish she could just talk back to me, tell me that everything is going to be okay.

I spent half the day trying to call Jess. It always just rang until it went to voicemail, she never answered. She’s ignoring me. I guess I understand that.

“Um, hello,” I said into the phone. At least Peggy is answering my calls.

“You sick, awful... *horrible monster!*” she shouted.

“Pe...”

“How could you do that?”

“I...”

“Why didn’t you just kill us all if you were going to do this?”

“I didn’t mea...”

“How can you be like this, Brynne?”

“No, I’m...”

“Never call here again.” she said, then hung up.

I wiped at the tears and thought about what she had said. She's right, I am a horrible monster. They are the only family I've had in over a century and this is the way I treat them? The way I treat Jess, who is like a sister to me? I wish I could explain to her that I didn't mean it.

I sent a text to Barney, asking him to please let Jess know I was sorry, that I will do whatever I can to make it up to her and to prove she's innocent, I just need to hear her voice and know she's okay. He didn't reply.

I laid in bed, trying to come up with a way to fix this, until sleep overtook me.

Thursday, June 12

“Would, um,” I said to Celeste. She was serving lunch. “Do you think, once this is over, the VI will just... kill me?”

“What?” she said. She sat the plate of fried chicken in front of me. “No, I don't think they are going to kill you. You didn't do anything wrong. You've been...”

“Even if I ask really nicely?”

I've spent the past couple of days looking deep inside, thinking about my life and what I've done, and when I take an honest look at myself I see that all I ever do is cause problems for people. At least for people I care about. I can't let that happen anymore. I need to end this miserable existence for the sake of those I love and anyone I may ever care about in the future.

“What about Marissa?” she asked.

“Um,” I shrugged. “She isn't here, is she? Obviously I don't mean much to her.”

“You can't think like that.”

I can't? She's been a lousy girlfriend. She's never here when I need her, she takes off and doesn't answer her phone, she chooses to help someone move when I'm laying here half dead, and she treats everyone around me like crap.

Oh, and she thinks my best... my *sister* is a killer.

“Ya know, I'm feeling up to going out for a walk later on, I think.” I said.

“It's not safe for you to go alone. I'll come along.”

“And get killed.” I mumbled.

"If you are attacked again, in your current state, you'd be defenseless. At least I can work a gun pretty well, which is better than nothing."

"Celeste," I looked up at her. "If you met with the ones who did this to me you'd be dead before you could pull the trigger. They're way too fast."

"I might surprise you."

"You might not." I said. I sighed. "I'll just stay in." I got up from the table, no longer hungry. "I don't want your death on my conscience too."

I watched cartoons all day. Shortly after dinner Marissa showed up. She sat next to me on the sofa and didn't say anything. I didn't say anything either.

"Oh good, you're here." Celeste said. That's weird.

"I said I'd come." she replied.

"Yes. I'm going out." Celeste said, heading out the front door.

That explains it. So Celeste must have called her. I wonder how she knew her number. Maybe she got it off my phone.

"You suck." I said to Marissa.

"Don't say that." Her face wrinkled up as if she were going to cry. "You have no idea what I've been through in the past few days."

"Enlighten me."

"I went to help my friends move and Ale... the father was livid. He was screaming and yelling and throwing a fit, so it was tough to be there."

"Why didn't you leave, then?" I asked.

"They needed my help. And then last night I got in a fight with Miranda and she nearly killed me."

“You look very much alive right now.”

“Hey, I've been through stuff. You're lucky to have me, ya know.”

I am? She's been a terrible girlfriend. Except she did have stuff happen. And she needed to help her friends. And I'm lucky to have *any* girlfriend right now. Especially since my best friend is an accused killer.

“I need to go find Jessica.” I said.

“When you're stronger. I'll take you. I want to be there when you finish her off so I can spit on her body.”

“She's not...” Not a killer? Of course she is. I made her that way. “She's not... um... going to be that easy to... she's strong.”

“Call in the VI.”

“Yeah, I guess I could. They'd help.”

“She barely got away last time.” she said. “With you there helping they'd be sure to get her.”

“You're right.” I agreed. If I were to help then I could at least slow her down enough that they could take her out, even if she is stronger than me.

“I know it's hard, but it's better for everyone if she's gone.”

“I know. I just wish I was strong enough to do it myself. I made her, I should end this.”

I got tired and felt hazy, so I had to go lay down. She covered me with my blanket and tucked Jenna in beside me. At least I think she did, I was so confused that I wasn't sure. All I know is she left and I faded into a fitful sleep.

Friday, June 13

“How are you this morning?” Celeste asked. She was standing at the foot of my bed.

“Better.” I said, stretching. “Good enough to go after Jess, if you think the VI would be able to help today.”

“Go after...” she stepped back and gave me the strangest look. “I thought you were convinced she was innocent?”

“What? No, I know she did it, I know she's a...”

What? Wait. No, I know Jessica is not a killer. I remember thinking yesterday that she was innocent, that all this is a horrible misunderstanding and we can clear it up. That *I* will find the real killers and clear this up.

“I... what is...”

“Brynne?”

“I remember being so... confused last night, and then...”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” I said. I shook my head. “I... Jess... wouldn't do those things.”

“That's what you keep telling me.”

“So why did I wake up so convinced that she did?”

“Well, maybe in your sleep you thought about it and...”

“No!” I sat upright quickly. “No no, I remember. I remember that Marissa started talking about it, and then...”

“She managed to explain to you how much evidence there is?” Celeste suggested.

“No! I mean... she was telling me how bad her past couple of days

were, and I was thinking about how lucky I am to have her, and..."

"Oh please,"

"And then... I mean it's like I got fuzzy headed, and... and just... suddenly felt completely overwhelmed and certain that Jess did those things."

"We don't know she didn't." Celeste said. She sat on the end of the bed.

"I know she didn't."

"Then why did you say..."

"Because... because..."

I kind of remember this happening in the past. I was so certain she was innocent, then after talking it over with Celeste and with Marissa I realized she was guilty. Except I know she's not. And it always seems to happen when I get hazy and after talking to...

"Marissa!" I shouted. Celeste swiveled her head to the door. "No, not here. I mean... I mean..." I paused. "I don't know what I mean."

"You should go back to sleep."

"No, Celeste, is it possible for someone to, like, I don't know... control someone else's thoughts?"

"Telepathy doesn't exist, Brynne."

"Are you sure? I mean there is a lot of things people think don't exist which really do, right?"

"You're not making sense." she said.

"I think... I think... I think Marissa somehow makes me think Jess is the killer."

"That's because you care about her and her opinion matters. She's convinced, so you give in to her opinion and manage to convince yourself."

"No, I don't think so. I mean... I mean I'm lucky to have her and all, but I don't think I'd do that." I sighed. "Oh."

"Oh what?" Celeste asked.

"I mean... I mean... she's not."

"Not?"

"A good girlfriend."

"I've been saying that same thing all along," she said, sounding annoyed with me.

"She sucks. I... but when I got hazy I remember thinking... I mean maybe she... uses some kind of mind control for that, too."

"This whole story seems very improbable. I think you need more rest, and I think..."

"Celeste!" I pounded the bed with my fist. "I know how crazy this sounds, but... I don't even like Marissa!"

There, I said it. It's true, too. When I'm thinking clearly, anyway. Has she been making me think things all along? I mean... well what does that make her? She isn't a striga or I'd be dead. Right?

"I need to know what she is." I said to Celeste.

"Okay, if it'll make you feel better I'll give Paolo a call and see if he's ever heard of anyone who could do what you're describing."

"Thank you."

"Don't hold your breath, though," she said, standing.

Sunday, June 15

After waiting for over a day to hear back from the VI to see if they have ever heard of anything like Marissa, we got back a big fat no. Well, not a no completely, because someone there *may have* heard *something* once about *something* that could control people's emotions when they were nearby. Which isn't exactly what is going on here. Plus, he said it could just be something he heard in a book he read once.

Right.

Great.

Marissa tried to call four times yesterday, and I managed to ignore all of them. Once I had Celeste answer and tell her I was asleep. I figured it would be safer for Celeste to talk to her than it would be for me. For some reason Marissa has a huge sway over me. I think.

"I have to find Jess." I told Celeste. "I'm done waiting for answers, and I'm not going to be able to avoid Marissa forever. She'll eventually come around, and I really need Jess here when she does."

"Brynne, we don't even know..."

"I know Marissa did something to me. I'm just not sure how or what."

"I just don't think it's safe for you to go out alone."

She's right, of course, but I can't wait around until Jessica ends up dead. Or I do, for that matter. Plus, kids are still dying around here and we have no idea why, because Roderick is still in France.

I tried to call Jess-- yet again-- and she wouldn't answer my call. I really need to talk to her. Ted and Peggy won't answer my calls, either. Barney is my last hope. If I can get him to talk to Jess then maybe she'll give me a call and I can grovel.

"Yep." he answered.

"Barney? This is..."

"Benedict Arnold?" he asked.

"I know I deserve that." I said. "Please just listen. Something is going on, someone is making me believe stuff, and I *know* Jess didn't do anything wrong."

"She said you told her that before. Just before you sicced the Venator whoever-they-ares on her."

"I was... Look, I figured out who was making me think and say things like that, and I need to talk to Jess. I need to apologize, I need to get her help to stop them, and I need to make sure she is safe."

"I don't think..."

"Barney! Come on!"

"I'll call her and let her know you want to talk to her." he promised.

"Thank you!"

"Don't get your hopes up, she's pissed."

"Tell her I'm sorry, and I love her, and I'm sorry, and..."

"I gotta go." he said.

"Barney?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. This means a lot to me."

"Bye Brynne. I hope she calls and you get this worked out. She sounded pretty miserable when I talked to her last night."

I waited around for hours, dodging yet another call from Marissa. I'm afraid if I don't answer soon she'll just show up. I'm kind of surprised she hasn't already, really.

"Dad?" I heard Celeste say. She was in her bedroom, and had just answered her cell. "What? Hold on a minute, you... no. I said no. You did what!?"

I wasn't trying to pry, I swear, but I could hear clearly from in where I was at in the living room, even over the television. Sadly I couldn't hear his side.

"That's bullshit and you know it!" Celeste shouted. "No. I said no!"

I quietly crept to her door and listened, hoping to hear the other side of the conversation as well. Yeah, okay, I was eavesdropping. I'm sure she would understand. Or not. But I was also concerned, I could hear her crying.

"Why would you want to talk to her?" I heard her ask.

I heard her feet padding against the floor, coming closer. And then she flung the door open and stared at me, a startled expression on her face. She jammed the phone into my chest and let go, leaving me to hurry to catch it. By the time I did she had slammed the door shut.

"H-hello?" I said into it.

"This is..."

"Agent Marcus?" I said. "What's going on?"

"Shut up and listen." he demanded. "I don't like you,"

“Sir,”

“You are scum. A monster. Evil incarnate.” He sighed. “But my daughter has this... affection for you.”

“I really like...”

“Silence!” he shouted. “That is why you get this one chance, and only this chance. We have your friend. If you wish her to see another day you will come take her place.”

My heart fell through the pit of my stomach. He's going to kill Jess! Or me. Or both! What have I gotten her into?

“Where...”

“Celeste knows.” he said. “She cannot come.” he growled. “If my daughter come near these horrible... If she comes along the deal is off. *Everybody* dies! Got it?”

“Got it.”

He hung up the phone. Oh crap. Oh poop doodles. Now what? If I go in there most likely both of us will end up dead. That man will just kill Jess, then me. Of course I'm faster than he is, so maybe I can stop him in time, but he made it sound like he has help. Can I get Jess out before anyone can stop me?

The phone rang again. I looked down at it, wondering whether to answer it or take it to Celeste, but I realized it wasn't her phone that was ringing, it was mine, which was on the table across the room. I hurried to it.

“Hello.”

“You have to save her Brynne,” Peggy sobbed.

“Pe...”

“She said to tell you not to, but they hit her! I could hear them hitting her!”

They are beating her! Oh my gosh, I don't know if I can handle this.

I want them dead. All of them. Including Agent Marcus.

“Brynne?” It was Ted now. “Jess said you knew them. She's tied up, and it sounds like some guy, some...”

“Agent Marcus,”

“Is running things, but he has some partner. She tried to tell me more, but every time she opened her mouth they hit her again.” He sucked in a deep breath. “Get my little girl back, Brynne. Please.”

“I'll do my best. I better go now before they do anything.”

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

“Take care of yourself, too.” he said. “We love you.”

“I love you guys.” I told him. “Don't worry, I will get her out of there.”

Sure Brynne, make promises you're pretty sure you can't keep. Well, it's been interesting anyway. I've been wondering if the VI would kill me when this is all said and done, and now it looks like someone else may take care of that instead. If I can get Jess out, I'm okay with that. She's worth it.

“Are you ready?” Celeste asked.

I looked up and she was in the doorway to her bedroom, heavy boots on, a holster on each side with a gun in each. Across her back was strapped a scabbard with a sword handle protruding above her left

shoulder.

“Wow.” was all I could think to say.

“Need to get anything before we head out?” she asked.

“Oh, you... can't go.” I said.

“I'm going.”

“No.”

“This is...”

“Far too dangerous.” I told her.

“I can handle myself.”

“Undoubtedly. But I don't want you to get hurt.”

“Fine.” she said. She leaned against the doorway. “Have fun finding them.”

“Have... what?” Oh. She's the one who knows where they are. “Let me guess, you're...”

“Not telling you.”

She smiled and strolled toward the door, preparing to leave. I can't let her go. If she does, he'll make sure Jess dies. Maybe I can ditch her once I find out where they are.

“I don't think this is a good idea, and especially since your father is...”

“My father is involved in this somehow, but I'm not convinced yet that he would just...” She shook her head and closed her eyes. “He would never resort to turning his back on the VI just because he hates you so much.”

“Gee, I feel better already.”

It was nearly dark when we got there. A huge abandoned mall in Olathe. A part of me felt a sense of loss and pity that such a grand structure with so many joyful places and stores that so many people had shopped at was now practically in ruins. And then I snapped out of it and realized my best friend was in there somewhere and I had to go save her.

“You stay here.” I told Celeste.

“Not a chance.”

“I will break your legs if I have to.” I told her. I kind of meant it, too. “Look, I’ll need some backup in case Jess and I have to make a hasty retreat. You can be waiting, all weaponry and hot looking, to cover us while we get away.”

“Brynne,”

“Just stay!” I said. She nodded. “And I’ll take the sword.”

I did a quick walk around the perimeter of the building, and I could feel eyes on me as I did. I hoped Celeste would be safe while she waited.

On the back side there was a door that led to what signs declared to be the home and hobby entrance. Uh-huh. All I saw was torn up carpeting and broken glass. I entered that way, sword ready. Not really sure how well I’ll do with a sword, but it seemed like a better choice than the guns for this particular occasion, since Jess would be there and I didn’t want to accidentally shoot her. Plus, Celeste may need the guns.

“Brynne,” I heard Jess’s voice call out, muffled like someone was covering her mouth.

“I’m coming Jess.” I mumbled to myself. “Hang in there.”

I worked my way toward a mall directory, trying to get a feel for how the mall was laid out. There were an inner and outer ring of stores, with a corridor between and some hallways shooting through the center of the inner ring. I was guessing she'd be somewhere down one of those, based on where it sounded like her voice had come from.

Two steps further away from the door and it was pitch black. No light was reaching from the dim remains of the day outside. Luckily I could see well in the dark, but it didn't make it any less creepy.

"Hello there." he said.

Standing in front of me, no more than ten feet away, was Roderick. I sucked in a breath and raised the sword defensively. Oh crap! How did he get here?

"Don't worry," he said with a chuckle. "I have no interest in hurting you." He paused and looked behind him, chuckling again. "Yet." He motioned down the corridor. "Come."

"What have you done to her?"

"Haven't laid a hand on her pretty little face." he said.

Sure. Okay. So Agent Marcus is working with Roderick? That doesn't even make sense!

"Paolo is expecting you." he told me.

"Paolo?" I said. I stopped in my tracks. "What?"

"He's very excited you decided to come."

If Paolo is in on this then I can't trust anyone. And I'm pretty much dead. Oh I just hope Celeste can get away. Unless she is in on it too.

“Run Miss Brynne!” Paolo shouted when we entered the room.

“It's too late for that.” Agent Marcus said.

“Where's Jess?” I asked.

Yes, I'd like to save Paolo. He is obviously just a prisoner and not part of this. A relief for certain. But given the choice, Jess is and always will be my number one priority, above everyone else.

“She's...” Paolo said, jerking his head to the side.

Jess was slumped in a chair. There were ropes around her arms and wrists, holding her down. They were heavy ropes, tied to a heavy chair. She wasn't going anywhere. And she seemed to be knocked out at the time, anyway.

“Is she okay?” I asked.

“For now.” Roderick answered, again with his hideous chuckle.

“What do you want, then?” I asked them.

“Oh, the show is just about to begin.” he said.

“Dad!” Celeste's voice rang out from behind me.

“Celeste, what are you doing here?” Agent Marcus asked. His eyes narrowed on me. “You promised me.”

“What the hell is this?” she asked. Roderick chuckled again.

“They must die!” Agent Marcus insisted. “They are evil, Celeste. And you, you're too close to this one.” he said, his meaty fingers once again pointing in my direction.

“So you...” she looked at Roderick. “You teamed up with *this thing* to keep me away from her?”

"I saw the way you looked at her."

"Dad,"

"It is unacceptable!" he shouted. "I will not have my daughter involved with a vampire!"

"Whoa!" I said, holding my hand up. "Seriously? That's what all this is about? You join a monster who kills children just because you are worried your daughter may, like, date me?"

"You are evil!" he said, scowling at me. "You will corrupt her, and her soul is more important to me than the lives of any thousand children!"

"That's messed up." I pointed toward Jess. "Let me take her and I'll leave and you will never see us again. I can promise you I will never come near Celeste."

"I don't trust..."

"Am I late for the party?" a man's voice interrupted.

How many people are we going to have here? This is ridiculous.

Wait.

No way! No! No!

"A... a..." I sputtered.

"Hello Brynne. Been a long time." he said. He had a Texas accent now, but it was him.

"You're dead." I said.

"Eh, not so much." he-- Alejandro-- said.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so glad you're alive, I just..."

"Sorry to say, you won't be for long."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Glad.” he said, flipping his hand as if that explained everything. “Or alive.” he added. “I’ve been disappointed in you, Brynne.”

“Me?”

“I should have just killed you when I wiped out your family. But you’re sort of pretty,” he said, moving his hands about as he spoke, like he always did way back when I knew him. “And I have a weakness for pretty girls.” He tilted his head. “Don’t I, Marissa?”

She suddenly appeared over by Paolo. She was stroking her hands down the side of his face. She winked at me, then turned her attention to Alejandro.

“So... so what is this?” I asked him. “You... what, had her date me?”

“Oh that,” he said, smiling.

“Damn Brynne, you’re so easy.” Miranda said from over by Jess. “I can have you seeing things at the snap of a finger, sis can make you feel and believe things, and it’s all just hilarious!” Her laugh was scary.

“It was good for a laugh, that’s for sure.” Alejandro said. “Truth be told, I wasn’t completely certain I wanted to off you just yet. I thought maybe you still might come around to reality and realize that these people aren’t like us.”

“No kidding.” Celeste chimed in.

“They’re cattle, Brynne. Only there to feed us and serve us.”

So that’s what this is about? People being cattle. Me never being quite the killing machine he thought I should be? Insane!

“So you’re the werewolf thing?” I asked him.

“Yep,” he said, laughing. “You can thank Miranda for that one. She’s good, ain’t she?”

"I'll just take my daughter now and be on my way." Agent Marcus said, moving toward Celeste.

"Oh, sorry about that partner," Alejandro said. "Not going to happen."

Roderick grabbed Agent Marcus and swiftly... well, broke him in half. Not literally, but he bent his back over the wrong way, shattering Agent Marcus's spine.

"Dad!" Celeste shouted. She started toward him and Roderick turned toward her, forcing her to stop.

"For... you..." Agent Marcus gurgled. "I did... it... they said... safe."

"Daddy!" she cried out. "Help him!" she implored me.

"Well look at that, wouldja?" Alejandro said, laughing. "Our boy Rod here has been working out."

Celeste let out an angry roar and opened fire with her guns, unloading into Roderick. One of the bullets grazed my side as I took the opportunity to move toward Jessica.

Jess was waking, I could see her body moving now. I was almost to her, but Miranda was finally realizing what was going on, and she was stepping in my direction. I swung the sword hard, hitting her in the midsection. She doubled over in pain as I continued to swing, a huge downward arc, slicing the ropes that held Jess. The blade continued on to the floor, clanking as a six inch piece broke off the end and went flying somewhere. I dropped the sword, feeling weaker now that I was unarmed.

I turned just in time to see Roderick reach Celeste. He gripped her throat and was choking her, but Jess was quick to wake, and even quicker to her defense. Roderick was weakened from the bullet wounds, and was pulled off of Celeste easily. I started toward Paolo, hoping to free him before Alejandro could do anything, but Alejandro

was nowhere to be seen.

But Marissa was. She was standing by Paolo, one hand gripping his hair and pulling his head back, exposing his neck. If she bit him he would die. She would not go easy and just drain a little blood, she would rip his throat out.

“Don't do it.” I said.

“Why?” she asked, laughing.

“You have to have at least a little bit of a conscience. Don't you see how wrong this is?”

“Wrong for us to be the top of the food chain? We were made this way! It's nature!” she said. “You don't see a mountain lion take pity on a rabbit, do you?” she asked.

“He's a person!”

“So what? Oh I am so glad I don't have to listen to your whiny ass anymore. Alejandro said you were a whiner, but I had no idea until I spent time with you just how true that was.”

“So it meant nothing to you? You can't, like, do me just this favor?” I asked. “Let this one meaningless creature go for me?”

“For you? Oh honey, you honestly believed I cared about you, didn't you? How pathetic!” She laughed. “But damn I can act! I'm not even into girls and I had you and everyone around you going!”

“You deserve the Oscar, sis.” Miranda said. She had somehow made it back to her feet and stumbled over to Marissa's side. “Let's get out of here.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

With that Marissa reached down with her other hand and gripped Paolo's jaw. His face took on a shocked look, then sort of a grimace, just before she twisted. She didn't break his neck and end it there, she twisted far enough around to break it, then with a swift jerk it came

off.

His head came off.

I stared in disbelief as they began to walk away. Marissa paused, kissed Paolo's lips, then laughed and threw the head in a lob to me. I caught it and stared down into his eyes.

I read somewhere once that when they beheaded people in the middle ages that their heads were actually still alive for as long as fifteen seconds. A live brain, unable to move or breathe, but still alive inside there.

The thought that I was holding Paolo's head in my hands, staring down into eyes that were still alive and still seeing me creeped me out to no end, and I shuttered.

"I will make them pay for this." I promised him. "I'm sorry."

I placed his head in the lap of his body. I turned to Jess, to get her to come with me to pursue the sisters, and I could see that she had been fighting with Roderick all this time. She had him pinned face down to the floor, one arm behind his back and the other arm actually laying ten foot away. She was bloodied and breathing hard, too, but Roderick was gasping as the blood rushed from him.

"If we hurry we can catch them." I told her.

"Yeah," she let go of his arm. "He's done."

He didn't move when she let go, and even his arm remained behind his back. He gasped a couple of times, then went silent.

And then Alejandro reappeared.

“Well well, you've got more of a killer instinct than I figured.” he said, smiling. “But it's too late to change my mind, little girl.”

“Bastard.” I said.

“Well, now, that's your opinion, and I...”

“I'll second that.” Jess said.

“And me.” Celeste added.

“Seems to be the general consensus.” I told him. “This didn't have to happen.”

“Sure didn't. Coulda killed you off a hundred and a half years ago. Shoulda, but like I said before, you're pretty.”

“There doesn't seem to be a lot of point to this conversation.” Jess said.

“That's true enough.” Alejandro said. “Goodbye Brynne, it was good seeing you again.” He smiled. “I really regret having to do this.”

He lunged at me, gripping my arm and swinging it around behind me like Jess had done to Roderick. I heard popping as he broke my right arm in at least two places.

But I didn't scream out or cry. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of that. Instead I used my heel to kick his shin as hard as I could.

And broke my heel.

He was much tougher and stronger than I was. Much. We outnumbered him, but I suddenly understood that we weren't going to overpower him. Celeste was human, and needed to stay out of it and get out of here. Jess was stronger than me, but she wasn't nearly as strong as he was, she was banged up from fighting, and she didn't have his experience fighting.

"This wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't brought the one damn agent in the Venator Inmortuorum who could do anything into it." He told me. "Those fellas in Wichita were mine."

"They were killing people." I said, fighting against the pain.

"Let her go!" Celeste shouted. She had her gun aimed at him.

"Or what?" he asked, laughing. "There are two possibilities here, and neither are going to end well for you, Agent Marcus."

"What two?" I asked, trying desperately to buy time to think.

"She fires and hits you instead," he said, a little chuckle, "Or she doesn't hit you, but I move in plenty of time and she dies a slow and painful death." Then to her he said "Leave now and when I'm done with them I'll kill you quick. Stick around and there will be more pain than you can imagine."

"Go Celeste!" Jess shouted. "You're not going to be any help anyway."

"Bullshit." she said.

She fired. And hit me in the side.

She shot me! I can't believe she shot me!

But Alejandro let go of me and was now on top of her, pinning her to the floor. He was so fast!

I lunged his direction, ignoring the pain in my leg, heel, and side. Jess beat me to him. She had her arm around his neck from behind, but I already heard the cracking of bones coming from Celeste. His hands were on her face and neck, and he was leaning in with his teeth bared.

Celeste was screaming out in pain, which was actually a good sign because it meant she was still alive. At least for now. I hoped more than anything that I could save her right then. I didn't want to lose her.

I kicked him with the bad foot again, landing a blow to the side of his face, just missing Jessica's arm. It distracted him enough that he turned his head toward me and I kicked him in the teeth. I broke one off, but he just laughed and spit it out.

I pulled my foot back for another kick and before I could land it his hand shot out and grabbed my foot, sending me tumbling. I struggled back toward him, crawling now. But before I got there I saw Celeste's hand swing toward him. He turned to her just in time for the tip of the blade from the broken sword, which she apparently had found, to slam directly into his left eye.

He let out a loud roar and flopped backwards, sending him and Jess both away from Celeste and me. He rose to his feet, screaming as he gripped at the blade sticking three inches out from his eye.

“You bitch!” he shouted.

Meanwhile Jess had found the remaining two foot length of the sword and made her way back to him. She swung hard at his leg, slicing almost all the way through his right leg, making him fall to the floor. I made it to them in time to grab the leg and twist it until it came off.

Jess swung again and again, leaving cuts all over his body as he

wailed and writhed on the concrete. I got to my feet-- or at least the good foot-- and grabbed the sword from Jessica's hands.

"Get Celeste out of here." I told her.

"Brynnne," Jess said.

"I've got it."

"Are you sure?" she glanced from me to him and back. "I don't want to leave you here alone, honey."

"I need to end this myself." I told her.

"You sure?"

"I'll be fine." I said, nodding.

She went over to Celeste and lifted her up. Celeste was groaning and crying, but they made their way from the room. I limped to a spot near Alejandro's head.

"You killed my family." I said.

"Shoulda killed you!" he managed.

"You killed so many people, you heartless monster."

"They deserved to die!" he said. He caught site of the sword with his good eye and figured out what I was planning. "But I saved you, Brynnne." he said softly. "I could've killed you. I made you immortal, I gave you a life most girls only dream of."

"You call this a dream? I call it a nightmare."

"I can make this better." he pleaded. "We can... we can save lives, if that's what you want. Just help me."

"Alejandro,"

"Please, Brynnne. One more chance?"

“Too late for that.”

I swung the sword down, decapitating him. I kicked his head across the room and wobbled toward the door, not bothering to look back.

Jess was waiting for me just out in the hallway, holding up a still sobbing Celeste. They both gave me a long look. Celeste's eyes begged me to tell her that it all hadn't happened, that it was all a dream.

“It's done.” I said, feeling like I could join in Celeste's sob-fest, but really just too numb to cry. “All this time I thought he was dead.”

“Are you okay?” Jess asked.

“Are you?” I returned.

“A little banged up, but okay. How is your leg?” she asked, looking down.

“I broke my ankle, and it's going to need some attention pretty quickly or it'll start to heal in the wrong position and have to be rebroken to straighten it out.”

“Ouch.” she said, nodding.

“My arm is a mess.” I said, tugging at it and wincing.

“Maybe we can have the doctors look at it.” she said.

“No,” I said, shaking my head.

“We have to get Celeste to the hospital.”

“Jess,”

“He broke her cheek bone, I think.”

“It's too dangerous to go to the hospital.” Celeste mumbled, echoing my thoughts.

“You need help.” Jess told her.

“Not here.” I said. “We need to take her somewhere they won't think to look for her.”

“You think Miranda and Marissa will bother with her?” Jess asked, looking skeptical.

“No,” I said.

“The VI.” Celeste mumbled.

We went out to the car, Jess helping Celeste and me hopping along beside them. Jess drove us to Emporia, over an hour away, before finding an emergency room.

A doctor took care of my leg and arm while another took care of Celeste. Her cheekbone would require an operation to put in a small plate and screws, and she'd be in the hospital a couple of days, according to the doctor. And my leg and arm required casts. They somehow missed the bullet wound in my side, thankfully.

Explaining our injuries was more difficult than I figured it would be. My first explanation of a car accident didn't sit well, and they wanted to call the police. But eventually we convinced them that we had a dune buggy and were racing it around on a farm several miles away. It was being driven by a friend who had had too much to drink, and we came over a bit of a hill and hit a ditch, causing it to flip and throw us out. Celeste played the part of my step-mother, and we didn't have insurance. They seemed to buy it. Sort of.

I got a little scared, though, when I remembered that there were several dead bodies in a building, just waiting to be discovered. We might look slightly more suspicious if that little tidbit got out. Luckily that old mall was abandoned, and I figured it would be days before anyone noticed the bodies. Hopefully by then we'd be long gone.

“Why are we avoiding the VI now?” Jess asked, when we were alone

finally. "Surely they will know how to clean up this mess, right? And we have proof who the real killers were."

"Yes, and Celeste's father wasn't acting alone, Jess. No way."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure." I told her. "Someone was reporting that Roderick was still in France. Plus, Alejandro kind of said Paolo was the only one who would stop him. The way he said it makes me think he has people on the inside. Plus, they were awfully quick to go after you. Almost like they were just waiting for say so. Like they were waiting for the evidence to be planted to frame you for killing those kids."

"Sounds ridiculous to me."

"We'll have to ask Celeste more later. I don't think we can trust anyone anymore."

"Well we can't wait around here forever. Someone needs to stop Marissa and Miranda,"

"And whoever else is with them." I added.

"And someone may figure out where we are before long."

"I'm sure they will be watching the hospitals, if Marissa and Miranda reported in anyway."

"So what's the plan?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, if we get a chance, we get Celeste and get out of here. My leg and arm should be better in a couple of days and we can go after them."

Monday, June 16

When I woke in the morning Jess was there with me. She squeezed my hand.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Much better." I replied. "How is Celeste?"

"She's actually doing okay. In some pain, but basically okay."

"How is she dealing with losing her dad?"

"I don't think it has sunk in yet." she said. She leaned close to me. "Brynne, the nurses and doctors aren't buying the car wreck story at all, and I think it would be a good idea to get out of here as soon as you're able."

"Um," I did a quick self assessment, "I think I can go now, if Celeste is ready."

"We can't leave her here?" she asked.

"Jess,"

"I don't think anyone is going to mess with her in here."

"Jess... I don't think we can trust anyone anymore, and we have no idea if they will hurt her or not. I just think..."

"Okay, okay." she said, sighing.

Her phone rang in her purse. I'm not sure how she managed to not lose her purse during everything that went on yesterday, but she had it there with her. She looked at the screen and then mouthed "Barney" to me before she answered.

"They left a note." I heard Barney say. Sometimes I wonder if I'm

eavesdropping in times like this, but I'm really glad I can hear their conversation this time because Barney sounds like he's sobbing, and this can't be good. "They're dead, Jessica." he choked out.

"Who? Barney..."

"Mom and Dad... they..."

"What!?"

Jess dropped the phone. I shot my hand out and caught it as it fell. Jess's face completely drained of color.

"Barney?" I said into the phone. "This is Br..."

"They killed them!" he shouted.

It took several minutes for me to coax from him details of what happened. It was hard, because I was crying too. Ted and Peggy were parents to me too. Sort of adoptive, but I love-- loved them like parents, and I know they loved me.

The note was clearly from Marissa. She didn't sign it, but the note spoke to me directly. It said Alejandro should never have created me. It said they were going to get their revenge. It said this was only the beginning.

Thursday, June 19

My broken bones were mostly healed, but I knew that if Marissa and Miranda or their allies attacked us during the funeral Jess and I were going to be lucky to be able to protect Barney. It made me nervous. It was also very difficult to concentrate on protecting him or ourselves with the overwhelming sadness that enveloped me, and especially Jess.

We did everything we could to avoid speaking to the police. Barney hid the note, and we stuck with the story that we had no idea what was going on whenever we did have to answer questions. They spent a lot of time asking if we knew anyone who had any animus against Ted and Peggy, and we all managed to lie through our teeth on that front. We just flat out denied any knowledge of what happened or why.

Celeste brought up the possibility that the VI, or at least those within it who supported her father, may come for us during the funeral. They would know exactly where to find us. But there was no choice, we had to go. We owed it to Peggy, to Ted, and especially to Barney.

After the funeral we went back to the house to gather what we wanted of our things and of Ted and Peggy's. Jess and I knew we would not be able to come back for a long time. The VI and Marissa and Miranda made it too dangerous for us there.

"Where do we find them?" Barney asked. "I want to be the one who finishes them off."

"Um," I glanced at Jess before continuing. "Barney, you can't... I mean..."

"It's too dangerous for you." Celeste told him. "We'll take care of them, I assure you."

"Uh, no, it's too dangerous for you too." Jess told her.

“There is no way I'm not going along on this.” She said. “If you try to do that then I'll find them on my own.” Tears trickled down her face. “They can't be allowed to get by with this.”

“Celeste, you're just not equipped to deal with...” Jess began.

I have no idea what else she said, because just then I got a text from Marissa.

Wonder who is next. Who else does Brynney Brynne care about? Adoptive family? Taken care of... mostly. Other friends, loved ones... even one from the past? Hm... where to first?

“We all go.” I said. “Now.”

“Go where?” Jess asked, exasperated that I changed my mind.

“Georgia.” I said. “I think they're going after Teresa.”

Monday, June 23

I saw her walking across the mall parking lot, hand in hand with a tall girl. She smiled and laughed as she glanced about. I saw her eyes land on me, then turn away, only to come back and focus directly into my eyes.

She was still beautiful.

She turned and mumbled something to the girl she was walking with, I couldn't make out what, and the girl let go of her hand. The girl had a frown on her face, but walked away, leaving Teresa standing there alone.

I walked toward her, leaving Barney and his cache of weapons, Celeste with her still injured cheek bone, and Jess all behind.

"Brynne," she said. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I'm good, how are you Teresa?" I said. Then I realized that wasn't what she asked. "Oh, I mean... I mean I just was, um, in the area and thought I'd drop by and say hi."

"Oh." she smiled. "Hi."

"How have you been? You, um, look good."

"Oh." She blushed. "I'm pretty good. You?"

"Same as always." I said, shrugging.

"Good." she said. "I think." She smiled.

"Well," I shrugged again. "Anyway... um..."

"You look exactly the same." she said, laughing. "Not that you would look different."

"You do. Look different." I said. "Older... but in a good way. More mature."

"I guess." she said, shrugging.

"More ready..." I said, pausing. She still made my heart beat fast, just being near her. "More ready for a relationship?"

"Brynnne," she sighed. "I have a girlfriend."

"I know. I... I didn't mean with me."

"Yeah," she said. "I am more ready. And so are my parents."

"Plus you don't have to deal with me being a vampire if we aren't together." I said.

"There's that." she said sheepishly. "What happened to the *I'm not a vampire!* argument?" she asked, laughing.

"I'm learning that words matter less than deeds. If vampire is the closest description for what I am, I'm okay with it."

And it's weird, but I think I am. Honestly, who really cares anymore? Am I a monster? Sometimes. Am I a killing machine? To a certain degree. But I am not on the level that Marissa and Miranda are, and definitely not what Alejandro was.

"How is everyone?" Teresa asked.

"Not bad." I told her, trying to smile and trying to force myself not to think about Ted and Peggy. She didn't need to know about that.

"Why are you really here?" she asked. She was looking past me.

"Hi!" Celeste said loudly. Not sure what she is doing over here. "You must be Teresa."

"Yes." Teresa said. Her eyes narrowed. "I am."

"Oh, I'm Celeste." she extended her hand toward Teresa. "Brynnne's girlfriend."

“Oh.” Teresa said, her eyebrows raised as her eyes flickered to me. “I had no idea.”

“Sweetie, we need to get moving. We’ll be late.” Celeste said to me.

“Uh,” Late for what? “Yeah. Um... it was really good to see you, Teresa.” I said.

“Good to see you.” she replied.

“See you around.” I said. Celeste grabbed onto my hand and pulled me as she stepped away.

“Maybe it’s better if you didn’t, Brynne.” Teresa said. Her voice was strained. “Better for all involved.”

She turned and hurried away, toward the tall girl who was now waiting near the entrance to the mall.

“Girlfriend?” I asked Celeste, as I watched Teresa go.

“I don’t know.” she told me. “Maybe not, but we’re something anyway. We can figure out just what that is when this is all over.”

“Is that what you want?” I asked. “And will it ever be over?” I asked.

“Some day it will.” she said, ignoring my first question. “Come on. Barry got back with me. I think I have a lead on where we can start looking for the Satan sisters.”

“Do you trust him?” I asked.

“He’s about the only one in the VI who I *do* still trust.” she said.

“Where do we start?”

“Alaska.” she said.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about leaving Teresa unprotected, but if it meant getting those two for what they did then it would end this sooner and would mean Teresa was safe anyway.

“Do you have a coat with you?” I asked. “Let's go to Alaska.”

To Be Continued

About the Author

Jennie Taylor grew up in a small rural town, always dreaming of being a writer. She enjoys listening to music, writing, painting, photography, and spending time with her lovely wife. This is her first foray into publishing her work. She hopes to continue publishing in the future; she has many novels in the works. While she's not enjoying her creative pursuits or working at her day job, she can be found watching Hell's Kitchen, Project Runway, American Idol, and Korean dramas. Look for more novels coming soon!

contact Jennie at jennietaylor.author@gmail.com

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